This

NINE PLAYS

By

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To the memory of my grandfathers
EZEKIEL WOLVOVSKY 1839–1887
SIMON REZNIKOFF 1852–1910

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URIEL ACOSTA

Scene One

In the house of the Acostas in Portugal at the close of the sixteenth century.

URIEL ACOSTA'S BROTHER. The rain will stop
any day now . . .
I was in the garden this morning. The inner leaves
of the tree are turned brown . . .
You have been too long over the Bible, Brother.
Take the horse and splash through the puddles of the
road
The way Father used to . . .
There's a puddle in Father's coffin, I suppose.
Death is so trite and yet—
But we should be the happier
That Father has left this bubble, Earth, for Paradise.

URIEL. And your tears, my tears; a funeral is sad.
Whatever our wish whispers,—

HIS BROTHER. We are too near the Jews, our
grandfathers, to speak so freely.
Dominican Torquemada still listens at our hearts.

URIEL. Listen at mine: an uneven rhythm in its
monotony,
As if it would speak out and dares not and would and
dares not.

HIS BROTHER. Dares not to me?

URIEL. Here in Oporto Mother Church takes those
who grope too far,
Gently by the hands and hangs them by those hands,

hangs stones upon their feet,
To lengthen their reach that, groping and groping,
They catch hold of truth at last;
Or else, like Moses who split a rock for water, a man's thirsty:
Mother Church lifts his head
And down his nostrils drips drop by drop. He chokes—
But if he gulped too much would he not choke?—
Until he would swallow, like you and me, enough.
They have burnt a woman with a queasy intestine
That could not put up with bacon on Mondays,
For having Jewish villi;
What must be done to cure a queasy mind?

HIS BROTHER. Will you scratch at the wall of the cathedral?

URIEL. You who see in this wood below, the world,
Jesus walk, wringing, wringing his pierced hands,
Why should I tell you that he was not Christ,
That all that listening to psalms and what the rabbis taught,
That frenzy at the glacier flow of God,
That talk of kingdom come on earth that never came
And kingdoms after death that come, perhaps,
That wit, compassion, that torment was—for nothing?
Should I persuade you from your high estate,
You for whom the only son of God has died,
Who take his flesh in wafers in your mouth,
Whose priest hears out your story—
Your grave, the womb of an eternal life? . . .
Is it not shameful that I should daily go
To my office in the Church and pray

To the gilt Jesus and Madonna?
But should I escape to Amsterdam, will they not rack and question, rack and question you,
Truly a Christian, until you cry out, "Guilty!"
Or are condemned, too stubborn to confess?

HIS BROTHER. Will you leave forever this house our father built,
Our garden, the streets you know so well,
Your honours and office, guardian of the treasure of the poor?

URIEL. Because I have to say some words and bend sometimes,
Hurt no one but myself, if at all,
Is it not mad to throw away this comfortable life,
Which ended, for us is ended always,
To thrust myself into risk of fire or twisting wheels,
And not myself only, but the dearest to me?
If only we could go on as before,
But I am of those madmen, Brother. Forgive me.
Were the clouds lifting?

HIS BROTHER. The sky seemed darker and more rain.

THEIR SERVANT *comes in.* I'll close the shutters against the smoke and smell: the wind sets this way.

To Uriel. Is it not time you went down, sir? The square is crowded.
What heretics are burnt to-day, sir?

URIEL. A Jewess and a Moor.

THEIR SERVANT. Search the cracks, crush, pour

in boiling water,
And think the bed clean at last; one or two are in a corner,
And breed as many as there were.
Well, they burn hereafter.

URIEL. And here.

THEIR SERVANT. Amen, sir.
The Master must not find us idle servants. *Uriel goes out.*
To his brother. Do you go?

URIEL'S BROTHER. I have some reading.
When you have closed the shutters, bring a candle.
The servant does so. Uriel's brother reads until a shriek is heard. He presses his palms against his ears.

Scene Two

ONE OF SEVERAL MEN *to Uriel.* We have been informed by Lisbon
That you ask leave to go to France.
You know that some of Jewish blood,
Free of us,
Disgorge and spit out their Christianity.
We knew your father to be Christian,
But you your fellow officers have seen
Troubled, without trouble before your father's death,
Unless—corrosion of the soul not wrapped in faith.
Will you, then, tell us why you want to leave
Your birthplace?

URIEL. Salt in the air these days,
When the ships go down the river

To India or Brazil.
All our lives
My brother and I have duly walked
Within Oporto. *The men whisper to each other.*

ONE. Why to France, seething with heretics,
And near Holland?

URIEL. The French are skilled in the arts.

ANOTHER. More so the Italians.

URIEL. The university at Paris.

ANOTHER. A better at Salamanca.

URIEL'S BROTHER. Shrines—

ANOTHER. An afterthought.

THE FIRST. We who were your father's friends,
May we not warn you not to waste his wealth
And your lives
In an idle journey,
Lucky if you can return
To this rock on which we stand.
We will say to Lisbon
That you have changed your minds.
It was a fancy
Of grief for a dead father in the dead man's house
And youth eager to forget. *They go out.*

URIEL'S BROTHER. Will you not listen to them?
They are old and wise;
Father thought them wise.

URIEL. If we have souls, mine has a running sore
With my thick flow of lies.
I know a skipper.

We'll row about the harbor as if for sport,
At night climb upon his ship,
And with the tide sail out to sea.

HIS BROTHER. When England exiled the Jews, the captain of their ship
Stole all they had, and left them on a sand-bar in the Channel;
They stood tiptoe and stuck their noses up for air,
But still the tide came up, and so they drowned.
If your friend should serve us so?

URIEL. I know that here it is bad and there—who knows?

Scene Three

Within a synagogue at Amsterdam.

A RABBI *to Uriel and his brother.* Since we are not to boil the kid in its mother's milk,
We are not to have butter with our meat,
Nor after meat milk, nor for milk, dishes used for meat—
A wall about the forbidden ground. *Uriel makes a gesture of impatience.*
You must unlearn the uncleanliness of Christians.
The rabbis have considered each thought and action;
Troublesome to plan each step oneself,
How much better to do what wise men have thought out,
And the generations found good.

URIEL. And become a mechanism, not a man.
Nothing is true unless true for myself, by myself tested,

And then true or false only for myself.
What wisdom is such that I must
Shut eyes and gulp it, like a child medicine?
In whose life
Is not confusion clear to us?
In what reasoning or belief is more than error
Certain? *The others leave their books to listen.*
I have read "thou shalt not boil the kid in its mother's milk"
Was to forbid a heathen sacrifice, not food;
But if food, "not that which goeth into the mouth defileth".

ANOTHER RABBI. As if what harms the body with which we are entrusted,
Does not hurt the soul whose machine it is.
My son, you are young and new among us, listen patiently;
When you are old with thought about our laws, we shall listen.

URIEL. Must I spend my life in mummeries that common sense
Tells me at once are frippery and rigmarole?

URIEL'S BROTHER. If no man is so great that you must follow blindly,
Are you so great that you may push aside men like these?
If prohibitions like these of milk and meat do not matter,
Why not obey them?

URIEL. What wisdom is needed to grow old?

It is a wisdom animals and trees have.
Who shall divide what matters and what not?
Will the foolishness of the little not seep into the big?
Lie or truth, as convenient?
To these all matter, and to me.
Shall I, silent, see others wrong?
They are afraid that I crack open
The black doubt
In the shells of their precious laws.
I have fallen among another pack that says,
Do as we do, do and be still!

THE CHIEF RABBI. We have not sought you out as Christians do,
And said, Do this, but you have sought us out;
And if you do not care to do as we,
Go, but you cannot brawl among us.
We have withstood sword and fire two thousand years,
Surely words.
But the young and foolish, always with us,
Turn and listen,
Whoever pounds a drum and mounts
A stool:
Follow him into the marshes of his thoughts.

URIEL. Perhaps he is the sanest of you all.

THE CHIEF RABBI. For one sane, a hundred protestants are mad.
Our sons shall be inheritors of his wisdom;
That we are not infected with his folly,
I forbid our congregation
To trade with you, greet you, talk to you,
Hear you, look at you, or be near you,—

URIEL'S BROTHER. Uriel, we live this way or that
and die,
And surely earth is merciful, knowing us all so well.
Within the formula of any faith we may be good and
happy.
If we leave Holland too, what land is left us?
These are closest to us, friendliest; do as they do.
Do not answer now!
To the others. Let his blood cool in the shadows of our
synagogue,
Until the evening prayer
And the first stars bring us here again.
You will find, as I know him, a brother gentle and good.
They all go out but Uriel.

URIEL. This, then, is to be my life: pray, trade, eat,
wive, and sleep;
On Saturday walk along the quays after the prayers for
the afternoon, before the evening prayers,
Watch the ships lading and unlading;
Say what my neighbor says, bow when he does,
Because this man said that and he had it from him,
Argue if Rabbi This or Rabbi That was right, if the ass
be on a journey and Sabbath come, so on, so on;
Pocket my gulden with the best of them; and in the
end,
Wrapped in my prayer-shawl, go—they know where!
They have the streets of Heaven plotted and the houses
numbered,
And I may have a lease forever—a long time.
The babble of their prayers cuts the knots of the world.
Is the sun too swift? Pray, Joshua.

The savages who have machines save time:
The wheel turns the praying-stones and God listens . . .
It is good to swim, to walk, to run in a wind;
Only the brain, must that lie still and rot?
I'll send the bearded liars words to stick in their livers,
To make their children drunk.
How will my book begin?
Why are you afraid of the truth, if you are truthful?
If what I say is false—but does the false die?
The sweet kernel dries into dust, the shell is;
The ship sinks at last into gloom and knotted seaweed,
Or falls to bits on the white sand
That moves at every gust of wind like smoke . . .
These with merchandise cross oceans or barter in an alley;
Free as a tethered goat, I must feed
On truth and falsehood, although it gives me colic.

Scene Four

The noise of stones flung against the closed shutters of Uriel's room. He opens the door in answer to loud knocking. A soldier comes in and arrests him.

URIEL. I understand no Dutch.

ONE OF THE JEWS *who have crowded in, to Uriel.*
The jail and gallows are easily understood:
The key in the lock squeaks, "Stay";
The knot, rubbing on the gallows rope, says, "Jump!"
Uriel is led away. Boys tear up his books and papers until driven out by the watchmen, two old Jews.

THE FIRST WATCHMAN. Spit on, I should not

spit; but to make him I'm not afraid of feel as bad, I spit—a dirty world.

THE SECOND WATCHMAN. From Portugal and Spain like mice into this hole, Holland, here we creep along our street as still as we can,

When down comes a Uriel Acosta, prints in Latin, shouts, "The books of Moses are not by Moses."

And the Dutch, "Shelter these Jews and they destroy our religion."

The rabbis must come to the magistrates first, "He hurts us as much as you, our enemy as well as yours."

THE FIRST WATCHMAN. If you look once, the moon; then, a shadow on it; and sometimes, it's broad as an orange or thin as a blade of grass . . .

They've been tearing up his papers;

But unless they tear up his brain—.

THE SECOND WATCHMAN. The brain itself will tear up what the brain thinks.

Scene Five

URIEL *in his room.* A fine, my writings burnt—after all, nothing.

Now I am fixed within them like a weed

That torn up, trampled, grows again,

The hardier for its torments.

In someone's thoughts somewhat of me takes root . . .

Until the statue crumbles to a stone again . . .

None shall talk to me,

As if I have not Plato, the prophets, Buddha . . .

He sits down to a book and a stone flies through a window.

He closes the shutters, against which stones begin to drum.
You Jews! *He turns the pages of his book.*
My fingers sweat acid and where I touch leave holes . . .
"And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out from those borders and cried, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed . . . And he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs."
But if she were the servant of a centurion . . . *He turns the pages.*
"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished." *He turns the pages.*
Back from the dead, was this all you had to say, "Have you here anything to eat?"
They could not counterfeit that style. *He pushes the book aside.*
The Carpenter, despairing of his life,
Reached so surely for eternal life;
While Buddha, the king's son, satiated,
Saw himself forever rid of life. *He takes another book and turns the pages listlessly.*

Scene Six

Uriel's room after fifteen years. His brother comes in.

URIEL. So, you dared not come before the rabbis were willing.

HIS BROTHER. We must live with others; you yourself now seek us.

URIEL. Yes . . .

No one to talk to, even about trifles;
I might have been buried: in my grave,
The shroud, the coffin, coffin chest, and solid earth
Shutting out all companionship.
If you have ever walked alone in a woods, even for an hour,
Or through the fields, far from houses,
And returning, met a kind of man, nearer his dog or ox than you,
Did you not greet him gladly in that loneliness?
I have been alone fifteen years . . .
My life spent in a frenzy of words,
Spoken to myself.

HIS BROTHER. That is over. Your penance will be light.

URIEL. Have I not had enough to crawl back like this?

HIS BROTHER. The rabbis, for the discipline of the congregation, must—.

URIEL. You are married, of course?

HIS BROTHER. The daughter of a merchant here.

URIEL. Children?

HIS BROTHER. A son . . .
My share in ships to England and the Indies.
I'll tell the rabbis fully of your intention,
And, God willing, shall be back at once, Uriel. *He goes out.*

URIEL. So I become at last a monkey among monkeys.

Scene Seven

In a garden.

THE RABBI'S SERVANT *comes in with Uriel and his brother.* The rabbi asks that you await him here. *They stop at a bench. The servant goes out.*

URIEL. I need this sun. *Uriel and his brother sit down.*
Even our little walk has tired me . . .
I did not leave the house weeks at a time.

HIS BROTHER. If you were in a dungeon of the Inquisition—?
We, too, suffered; you, too, must be kind.

RABBI MENASSAH *comes in. To Uriel's brother.* My sister's daughter is here from Antwerp.
Uriel, leave your house; at your brother's
Learn the happiness in a Jewish home,
And what you did not give us time to teach.
I'll see you at the synagogue to-night.
Stay; the porter will unlock this gate. *He goes out.*
Uriel and his brother glance at the rabbi's niece, off stage.

URIEL. So quick and eager, she has no place in a room;
She belongs among trees and flowers. *The rabbi's servant comes in.*

URIEL'S BROTHER. Now to the sexton to buy your prayer-shawl, fringes, phylacteries, and skull-cap. *They follow the servant.*
One phylactery is strapped to the inner side of the left arm, the width of two fists from the shoulder-blade;
The other, on the forehead, the width of two fists from the nose's tip.

Wind the strap seven times about the arm and say, "Blessed . . . "

Scene Eight

In the house of Uriel's brother.

THE FIRST JEWISH MERCHANT. I do not like this Uriel in our venture.

THE SECOND JEWISH MERCHANT. Still, not to displease his brother—. *Uriel comes in.*

THE FIRST MERCHANT *to him.* So, you are to become a Jew again?

URIEL. We who hold out against the world, was I not most the Jew,
When I held out also against my fellow Jews?
But we are here to talk trade, I think,
Not theology. What is your matter?

THE SECOND MERCHANT. When we told your brother of our undertaking, he wished to have you share
In its certain profit. *Uriel's brother comes in.*

URIEL'S BROTHER. I'd place money, Uriel, in their venture;
No profit is sure, but in this, likely.
This, too, will be distraction: rub shoulders
With enterprising men.
To the merchants. If you will, be here this afternoon,
And I'll have contract and gulden ready. *The merchants leave.*
To Uriel. You'll lose your hesitant speech, that stoop, that shamble,

Become genial like a merchant.

URIEL'S NEPHEW *comes in.* Uncle, two men to see you—Christians.

URIEL'S BROTHER. I'll wait for you at my desk.

He and his son go out. The men come in.

ONE OF THE TWO. We are students at the university, have read Rashi, Maimonides, Abarbanel;
Have come to think that our salvation is, perhaps, in being Jews.
We have read your book of some fifteen years ago—and learn
That you have just become a Jew again!
Should we become Jews?

URIEL. I thought my work lost,
Every copy of my book burnt.
You say you have one?

THE OTHER OF THE TWO. We had, but lent it to a friend, he to another.

URIEL. Well, no matter. The book lives.
As to this you ask one who once was Christian, then Jew, then non-Jew, and now again a Jew:
Why incur the hate, at least the sufferance,
Of Christians, here the great and dominant majority,
Until both Jesus and Jehovah are with Jove,
Baal and Isis—
Believed in by intelligent peoples, too—
Incur this odium
To shoulder a mass of prayer and petty regulation?
But here I am a guest and my brother waits for me.
In my home we will reason the matter through seven

and seventy windings. *The students go out.*
There I have touched companionship!

URIEL'S BROTHER *who has come in.* Still talking to yourself? Who were your visitors?

URIEL. Students who have read my book.

HIS BROTHER. I hoped that we were quit of all that.
Don't set too much upon idlers, busy to gape at a sensation.

A CROWD *is heard in the street, then on the stairs. It enters and shouts at Uriel.* Unbeliever!

URIEL'S BROTHER. Have you not heard of his repentance, seen him in the synagogue;
Surely you know that Rabbi Menassah sent him here?

ONE OF THE CROWD. We heard what the two just here reported;
We know, though he apes pious men, what he speaks in his heart
Of sacred laws and the Holy One, you hypocrite! *turning to Uriel.*

URIEL'S BROTHER *to Uriel.* Answer him, tell him the truth.

URIEL *to his brother.* He tells me that. Can I believe
In what I left behind with my blocks and dolls?
This is our parting, I suppose. Live and farewell.
The crowd makes way for Rabbi Menassah.

RABBI MENASSAH. Uriel Acosta, did I impose a penance,
As others would? I was not wiser:
A penance would have searched you somewhat;

The true penitent seeks to mortify himself,
By punishment to cleanse himself.
None shelter you, deal with you, talk or look at you,
Until you come to the synagogue in mourning clothes,
A burning candle in your hand,
Confess your errors to the congregation,
Strip to the waist to be beaten by the sexton;
Then stretch yourself upon the threshold,
For the congregation going out to step upon.

URIEL. I had forgotten,
So stupid is the mind—at least mine—
Now what you are comes flooding back. *He goes out through the silent crowd.*

Scene Nine

Seven years afterwards.

URIEL *at a window in his room* . . . How many years since they stopped throwing stones?
I suppose spinning tops became the fashion.
They no longer trouble themselves to spit,
As I pass. I am left alone at last . . .
I have grown so afraid of the stillness of this house . . . and of the night.
In a few hours it will be night again.
What though the city is wound about me mile on mile,
The street-lamps shine, eight to a block,
And I light candles until the room is yellow,
Upon me, mile on mile, leagues and leagues beyond measure,
The night—

And no one to talk to, to call, to touch . . .
I sometimes think, Keep on
Into the fields and into new towns.
What shall I do in a strange town?
Will they not know me for a Jew?
And after a mile or two, the sun and wind become hateful.
Keeping indoors, I have become a mouse.
I know all the cracks in the walls:
Which divide and which run into the floor or stop, an inch from the ceiling . . .
Most are born poor; I could have had anything,
Even here in Amsterdam . . .
What can they do to me?
Mourning clothes and a candle in my hand.
What do I care what the masquerade costume is?
Face and words I must watch;
Clothes take care of themselves.
They will preach.
Words.
They will have me beaten.
One backache more.
The congregation going out shall step on me.
And I am through.
Must I keep on like this until I die here alone?
But do we not all die alone?
No, no,
To have friends about to distract the mind from pain, dying and living. *He goes out.*

A MESSENGER. Fortunate Abram, Pharaoh sends
me, his slave
To bring your sister Sarai
Into Pharaoh's palace, Pharaoh's wife.

ABRAM *to Sarai.* I told the Egyptians that you are
my sister only,
For fear that they would take you, though my wife,
And kill me.

SARAI. You priced your breath too high,
Unprofitable to that Abram
Who left Ur and idols for the wilderness.

ABRAM. Shall I turn from the long climb to God,
Fall out of the warmth and glitter of the sun
For lack of a word?
The universe, a wheel turning in sand, has drawn me up,
No longer master of myself, nor able to say mine.

SARAI. When with our cattle and slaves we climbed
that day
Beyond our town,
And left our river for the desert,
How likely that our journey
Would end beyond the next ridge of hills
In tumult and shouting,
As strange tribesmen ride us down.
How often was I afraid that in a land of barren hills
that slope to barren hills
We die of thirst under the malignant sun.
But day by day we journeyed on, and sun and moon
were friendly, sun and stars;

Until it seemed our journey might last centuries and centuries,
While lands covered with grain became desert and cities field again,
And rivers changed their courses and seas their beds,
But we, unsubdued by any tribe, journey on
Across all deserts and all seas.
But it ends:
I become one of Pharaoh's women,
And you go on, alone and shamed.
To her maidservant. Bring me my god that I brought from my father's house.
To Abram. Where is your god
That I may clasp his feet and cry for help,
Now that I am alone
Among my enemies, among men and stars?

ELIEZER, ABRAM'S SERVANT. Let us pray to the moon.

ABRAM. Then every lamp is god,
And every fire which the morning finds
Ashes.

ELIEZER. If praise, burnt offerings, first fruits, and fragrant woods
So often do not please the gods,
Our words may offend.
See, how the moon rides out upon the sky;
Across the river coiling into waves
His light answers us.

THE MESSENGER. Pharaoh waits.

ABRAM. We have lost ourselves among the gods

And are reminded we are men.
Sarai, keep whatever strangers do with us
Strange, no part of ourselves. *Sarai and the messenger go away. After a silence* What have I to do with wealth or wife?
Talk of these to the men
With whom the Nile and the Euphrates swarm.

ELIEZER. Sarai comes!

THE FIRST MESSENGER. Pharaoh from whom no thing is hidden knows
That Sarai is your wife,
And sent his messenger to meet us.

THE SECOND MESSENGER. You jackals from the desert have human speech
To add a weapon to your teeth and nails.
Take the woman and go.
Pharaoh would tear your tongue out, but your lips
Would smile and lie;
Would pull your lips off, but your body
Would bow and your hands lie.
The liars Pharaoh has inherited are his,
But you go!

CHATTERTON

Scene One

The tombs of Canynge, his wife, and Rowley within a church. From their tombs

CANYNGE. The marble flooring of my vault had fallen in,
And into me, waist-deep in sand, an elm
Struck its twisted roots.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. On my smooth body
That knew silk and wool only,
Ant-hills like sores.

ROWLEY. My enemy, the clock,
Talked me, the poet, down at last.
Live, while you can, Chatterton,
Until the mortgagee forecloses
Upon Bristol and your spacious sky.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. Bristol,
Beside the blue flowing water.

CHATTERTON. No wonder you ghosts cry out against
The clamp of death,
Lord Mayor Canynge, Lady Mayoress, and Priest Rowley:
Any weather is fair weather to a warm coat.
I eat in the kitchen, sleep with the footboy;
They send the footman to peep upon me, copying Mr. Lambert's documents,
Hours: eight to eight. Mother and sister take in sewing.
"Thank you kindly, Mr. Lambert," and "Thank you,

Mrs. Lambert",
Colston's charity-boy thanks you.
Trifles.
Have you had a pebble in a shoe,
A hair on your tongue, a grain of sand in your eye?
Do this and this and be back sharply.
If I could only—not stolen jotting;
The heart fills and fills, no end to seeing.
You are young, you were just seventeen!
I have lived one-fourth of my life, if I live to be seventy.

ROWLEY. The sun, the air, water when thirsty, bread and fruit,
When lean and hungered into exaltation,
Stretching along a bed when tired, and waking
To listen to the night over the house:
So easily are the living joyful.

CHATTERTON. A man with a grain of sand in his eye
Cannot see the sun.

CANYNGE. Prisoners have been known
To scoop their way, using fingers only,
Under walls, or with an iron nail
Scratch out the mortar holding stone and bars.
So I, scullion, became merchant and Lord Mayor; step by step, distances.

CHATTERTON. Prisoners are prisoners usually.

ROWLEY. While you live, you may outfly eagles;
Because you are not eagle, but a man.
Live, Chatterton! the earth is man's and star by star in time.

CHATTERTON. Sundays I have walked the streets and seen
Men and women,
Dressed in their Sunday clothes—their faces ugly;
And thought, Through these rushes I can tread any way I please.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. Holidays, when the night was warm,
We used to walk about
In silence, or talking softly, close to one another,
Houses and trees in moonlight.

CHATTERTON. I have seen them pass and turn the corner,
Colors shining in their wings and their heads rubies.
I will begin building myself webs,
Delicate thought leading to delicate thought—

ROWLEY. To catch flies?

CHATTERTON. To catch an earth tumbling on through space
And suck it dry.
I have made a Bristol out of rhyme
And peopled it with nobles, sat at their feasts,
Talked and heard;
But I am tired of make-believe, of being a scrivener's apprentice,
Mother and sister, sempstresses—a family of servants.
Some mole from prison;
But I shout the way Jews shouted at Jericho.
There are birds in heaven, who rides Pegasus may catch some.

Days like grains of sand slip through my fingers,
While I am idle on this accidental shore where I was born;
But I have feet to walk away and maybe wings.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER *is heard calling.* Tommy, Tommy!

Time to be back at Mr. Lambert's.

Scene Two

BURGUM *to his wife.* Here, a document that may interest you:
My family tree. You see the name
Was once de Bergham. Norman de Bergham fought at Hastings.
You didn't think when you were marrying
A pewterer, that he had blue blood.
As in a fairy tale, the beggar is a prince.
Here's the coat of arms.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Yes,
Like a fairy tale. This document
Does not look old.

BURGUM. Of course not.
It is a copy of the originals.
There is a boy named Chatterton—
His uncle is the sexton of St. Mary's—
The boy played at dolls with the church's old parchments,
Learnt his letters from them;
Colston's apprenticed him to Mr. Lambert, the scrivener.

Now and then the boy still visits
The old church, rummages among the papers,
Hopes to become an antiquarian, if you please.
The other day he came upon my name,
That is, de Bergham, and knowing of me,
Searched and found all, of which he made
This copy. I saw the originals.
They are, of course, the church's. They were smoky,
As if candle-smoked, scarce readable.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Perhaps it is a swindle. Did you give him
Money?

BURGUM. He is not bright enough to swindle;
Dreamy, the kind swindled. As proud as Punch,
Too proud to stoop to knavery.
I gave him five shillings. Perhaps,
I swindled him: a lot of work here.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Five shillings for that paper!
I scrimp and you waste money so.

BURGUM. He went to much trouble.
And really, he did not want the money.
I had to urge it on him. He seemed displeased.

BURGUM'S WIFE. That he could get no more.

BURGUM. That he was tipped
For just a friendly service, I thought.
He is a friendly boy . . .
I have been thinking . . . we are growing old;
If we had children, a girl, perhaps, to help you,
Or a lad, a lad like this,
Whom I could teach my business, what I have learnt

At such cost—
Perhaps the shop would be less dull.
The lad comes of decent folks, is poor,
And starved for friendship . . .
It was just a fancy.

BURGUM'S WIFE. We have been alone together
So many years.
Perhaps a nephew—
But a stranger at the table and beside the fire,
Why should we change?

BURGUM. It was just a fancy.

Scene Three

WALPOLE *in his mansion-house* Strawberry Hill *giving a manuscript to Gray.* The poems of which I wrote you, Gray,
Those found in a church at Bristol:
The work of one Rowley, when Edward the Fourth was king.
Spirited and harmonious!
I wrote this Chatterton to send more;
These came and this about himself:
A poor widow's son, apprenticed to a scrivener,
The work irks him, and won't I send money
That he may buy freedom and spend his time in writing—
It seems he dabbles in verse or wants to dabble.

GRAY *who has been dipping into the manuscript.* A forgery!
This is as modern as yesterday's gazette:

Modern words, consonants merely doubled,
Obsolete words, from any glossary to Chaucer,
Stuck into an idiom, modern as yesterday's gazette.

WALPOLE. Why flare up? The worm would crawl
Out of his rain-filled hole.
Of course, I'll write him to stand his apprenticeship,
practice the profession,
And when he will have made his fortune, write.
But why should you be angry at him, Gray?
What could your mother, the milliner, have done?
By chance, you had an uncle, rich and childless;
Uncle Antrobus made Eton and Cambridge possible,
Travel and contemplation, time to think and write.
After all, the *Elegy* is your only poem:
You felt *that*, how narrowly you might have been
Another "mute, inglorious Milton",
The "youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown".
As for me, Walpole's son,
From Strawberry Hill I dare not write unkindly
To this Bristol starveling.

GRAY. Kind of you, Walpole.

WALPOLE. Then I'll not write at all. I'll let it drop.
The lad's a swindler. Why should I help?
If he's a poet, that's his pleasure.
If he's a man, he'll stand on his own feet;
If he cannot and his poetry is lost,
How many poets do the wars kill,
And plagues? Ten thousand acorns on an oak
That one oak may grow again,
Should I water acorns? Besides,

The lad has home, food, and not arduous work,
Why should he beg? The great poets, Gray,
Have been citizens, capable
In the business about them: Aeschylus,
A soldier with the rest at Marathon,
Sophocles, an admiral, Dante, the politician,
And Shakespeare—
Not recluses in a college like you, Gray.

GRAY. Certainly not forgers.

WALPOLE. Why should you be angry at him, Gray?
What could your mother, the milliner, have done,
Unless your Uncle Antrobus . . .

Scene Four

LAMBERT'S MOTHER *to a servant.* Tell your master that I must see him
At once!
To Lambert when he comes in. That charity-school brat!
Read this:
Suicide, if we do not let him go!
To step upon a body in a dark hallway,
Or have a servant rush up to me,
Hear a shriek in the next room—
Let him go!

LAMBERT. What's this? a will and testament?

LAMBERT'S MOTHER. It says that he is going to kill himself
And so writes this, his testament.
Where is he?

LAMBERT. Safe in the office.

I'll pound him good and proper for the joke,
Wasting time in writing this, and scaring you.
LAMBERT'S MOTHER. Don't bother with him;
Cancel his prentice papers, rid the house of him!
He quarrels with the servants, makes such faces,
Talking to me or you, some day he'll spring at us.
And what have we done? We've given him a good home,
God knows, and you are teaching him your own profession.
I used to offer him buns or a tart, at first,
Carried them in my pocket, just for him;
But he would glare so at me, refuse, and snarl his thanks.
He's out of his mind!
And if he should do, what here he threatens,
There'll be no stilling the town's talk:
How we ill-used the orphan and drove him to it.
They may call upon the Council
For an investigation; then we are
At any servant's mercy. Pack him off!
I won't sleep another night
With that boy in the house.
LAMBERT. This will of his
Will be a good excuse. I have been disappointed
More than I cared to tell you. Those at Colston's
Thought highly of him, highly enough
To apprentice him to a scrivener; but he has proved
Dull, lazy, and insolent. I'll have him in.
To the footman. Send in Chatterton. Send for his mother, too.
To Chatterton as he comes in. Well, my whipper-snapper,

So you're going to commit suicide.
Here's a pocket-knife. Or perhaps,
Mother will send for arsenic,
Which the porter makes into a paste for rats.

LAMBERT'S MOTHER. Stop!

LAMBERT. So you don't like being my apprentice.
You needn't be. You were glad enough
To become such, if I remember.
Wait here until your mother comes;
We'll sign the necessary quittance,
And then march! Look here,
If you make such faces at me,
I'll smash in that ugly face of yours.
You're still my apprentice and I have the right
To beat you—
Which I have never done, I ought to be ashamed to say.
Lambert and his mother go out.

Scene Five

The same room in Lambert's house at twilight.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. Why does he keep us waiting so?
O Tommy, are you sure you're right?
You didn't intend suicide, did you, Tommy?

CHATTERTON. Mother, quit calling me Tommy!
Of course, I didn't intend suicide.
It was a trick to scare Lambert
And make him let me go; didn't it work?

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. Everybody thought it such a good thing,

When Mr. Lambert took you for his apprentice;
And you did, too.

CHATTERTON. I was sick of that school, boys and masters.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. You were glad to be taken into Colston's:
It is not for anybody's asking.

CHATTERTON. I would have learnt more by myself at home.
I thought that they would teach me Greek and Hebrew—English;
They taught arithmetic and how to write in a round hand;
What else?

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. That too is needed, Thomas.

CHATTERTON. For me,
Life is too short-winded and strength too weak
To waste. I thought through Lambert—
That here I would have, for myself, more time;
I have, but not enough:
I grudge fractions of my life to copying mortgages.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. But how are you to make a living?

CHATTERTON. From the work I want to do.
The Gentlemen's Magazine of London has taken a poem of mine;
I have two essays in the next *Cave's Monthly*;
And one who plans a new magazine, writes me from London,

"Thomas Chatterton, Esquire, Dear Sir: I count upon
your help" and so forth.
You and sister shall go in silks;
The proudest here in Bristol shall be glad to know you.
How can I stay in Bristol four years more
To become at last a scrivener,
When I have now such work and future in London?

THE FOOTMAN. Mr. Lambert will see you. *The darkened room is left empty.*

Scene Six

Chatterton is writing in a dingy room. A fat old woman, Mrs. Ballance, comes in and seats herself. Chatterton keeps staring in her face.

MRS. BALLANCE. You must excuse me, Cousin
Tommy, but as your mother's cousin,
And older than yourself, as it were in charge of you,
For didn't your mother send you here to live?—
You have been in London going on two weeks:
At first, quite proper and natural,
A young man to go about seeing the town—
And London must seem so big to you from Bristol—
I know how it was when I came to London;
But you can't keep on so, now can you?
You must try for a place in an office.
I wouldn't speak of any kind of work for a young man
like you,
Who likes to read and practices penmanship—
But a genteel clerkship in an office?
And must you stay up the night long?

It isn't good for the eyes and you're looking peaked as
it is.
You needn't stare so, Tommy.
The young man who rooms with you, has complained
to Mr. Walmsley,
"I can't sleep nights with him having his candle lit and
scratching paper."
It isn't I that am complaining, child.
I only mean the best for you.
Young people complain, but we old
Are glad to take the world as it is.
Many a bitter talk I had with myself,
Or with father and mother, and later with Ballance;
And here am I, an old woman,
Pains in me every moment I'm awake,
Husband dead and little I knew of him
When he was alive, sailing the seas,
And no children—never had any;
I go on living quietly,
Doing chores I'm lucky enough to get,
Frying my bit of supper at night,
Thank God! a roof over me.
When I die I'll say to God,
Just like a lady leaving a party,
"I've had a fine time, thank You."
Not that I mean it all, but He'll know
I mean some of it, and after all,
He does the best He can, I suppose . . .

The office of Fell, owner of The Freeholder's Magazine.

FELL. Mr. Chatterton!
Sit down, sir. Here.
The chair is rickety,
But pshaw! this is all a makeshift.
I am to be in funds. A lord—
I have sincere promises.
Then, sir, you will see a large room, grey carpet, delft-blue curtains,
No furniture at all, sir,
Just desk and chair, and next to these,
A visitor's chair. Space!
If I had money, I would build a house on a hill,
Overlooking a sweep of fields, and I would have
Great loaves baked in my ovens:
Whoever wanted to, could come and live with us . . .
You are young, Mr. Chatterton, for your mature style;
Your letters are as good as Junius.
Mr. Wilkes remarked your letters.
We must have you meet the Lord Mayor!
You did well to come; in a month
You'll be the talk of London,
You'll be gaped at in the coffee-houses.
The Freeholder's Magazine is proud
To have your writings. Come, your promise!
You must show me everything.

CHATTERTON. I am sorry, Mr. Fell, but Mr. Hamilton of *Town and Country*
Has bespoken an article; but other—

FELL. The Court's enemies—and the Court
Has enemies—are raising a fund:
The Freeholder's Magazine has become
A power; it must not be allowed to fall, to slacken.
For the next issue I must have from you . . .

Scene Eight

CHATTERTON'S SISTER *is reading a letter to their mother and grandmother* . . . settled in comfortable lodgings in Brooke Street where I have a room to myself.

I shall engage to write a history of England for Mr. Dodsley, the bookseller. Mr. Wilkes knows me by my writings. He has affirmed what Fell had of mine could not be the product of a youth. Creditors have sent Fell to King's Bench, he having offended certain persons; but I am bettered by this. His successors in *The Freeholder's Magazine* will be glad to engage me on my terms. Buy the next number of *Town and Country*. It has an article of mine for which I have been paid ten pounds. I am to be introduced to Mr. Beckford, the Lord Mayor. I will ensure Mrs. Ballance an allowance from The Trinity House, a foundation for widows of deserving seamen.

Do not worry about my clothes. London is not Bristol. Dress is not discussed here. If a man dresses well, praise; but if not, nothing is said. He is prudent.

Tell Katon and Mease to send me whatever poems they have and I will see them placed. I am sending you some trifling presents: six cups and saucers with two basins, two fans, and for Grandmother, some tobacco and a pipe.

Scene Nine

The room in back of Hodge's shop.

HODGE'S WIFE *at the window.* Quick, husband, there he goes. Run and ask him in.

HODGE. You know I've asked many a time
And he's refused.

HODGE'S WIFE. But now he's starving.
Look, how pale and thin he is, and can hardly walk.
Hurry!

HODGE. Why should I?
The boy is nothing after all to me:
A stranger who moves into a garret next door,
And in another month out and away.
Who offers bones to stray curs—that snap?

HODGE'S WIFE. You're a man and he's only a silly proud boy.
He's starving and we have so much.
Quick! he's at his door. Go or I'll go.

HODGE. You soft-hearted fool! *He kisses her and goes out. She prepares bread and butter and tea. Her husband comes back with Chatterton.*

CHATTERTON. Pardon me . . . your husband insisted . . .

HODGE'S WIFE. We are always glad to have a guest for tea. Won't you sit here? *They sit down. At first Chatterton eats slowly, then gorges.*

CHATTERTON. Pardon me . . . I had so much to do,
Rose late for breakfast and quite forgot lunch—

And now myself. No more, thank you.
I find that eating makes me stupider than I am.

HODGE'S WIFE. But we must eat.

CHATTERTON. Yes, we are that much animal,
Not trees, chained to earth,
Nor even beasts with four feet on it—
But if we could, like moths that have no entrails,
Live our day or two, untroubled by food,
And our work done, die!

HODGE'S WIFE. But a man's work cannot be done in a day or two.

CHATTERTON. No, it takes a lifetime.

HODGE. What is your work, neighbor?
When I close shop at midnight,
I see your candle burning. Do you read so late?
You must be fond of reading.

CHATTERTON. I used to be.
But now the taste is easily chewed out
Of what I read. Each generation
Finds the charm again—for a while.
These dry words of ours were poetry.
Take *mouse* from a word that meant in Sanskrit *steal*:
A thief called a mouse, if many use it,
Mouse is plain *thief*, the mouse forgotten.
Whatever men can make
Has their mortality. Talking of mice,
A rat haunts my room. Can you spare arsenic?

HODGE. Let me get some while we talk of it. *He goes out.*

HODGE'S WIFE. But what do you do?

CHATTERTON. I write—
Music after a fashion: a sulky music,
Made out of ordinary speech,
The way a sculptor might make statues
Out of sand, or carve wooden spools
The housewife throws away.
HODGE'S WIFE. . . . Whatever you do,
You must take care of yourself to do it.
Eat well and in time. But if you are poor,
What is there to be ashamed of?
Jesus was poor, the apostles begged their way.
We have enough and to spare.
You must come and eat with us.
Pride in such a little matter
Is silly. Be proud of your work
And humble yourself for it. When you can,
You will repay us.
What a little matter and not worth this fuss!
Promise that you are coming in to supper.
Promise me!
CHATTERTON. Why?
HODGE'S WIFE. Do you not love your work?
CHATTERTON. I used to . . .
I might write reams, catch in that mass of cobweb
A few phrases, in time sucked dry.
When I was a boy I played at blocks; and then tired,
Gave the little building a kick: down
It came with a little crash—
Because I saw
The little building empty and its sky,
The plaster ceiling.

HODGE *entering.* Here's your arsenic.

CHATTERTON. Thanks. I must go. Thanks for your friendliness.

HODGE'S WIFE. I'll keep supper waiting. You must come.

CHATTERTON. Good-bye. *He goes out.*

HODGE'S WIFE. Hodge . . . I think . . .
Take back the arsenic!

HODGE. Why?

HODGE'S WIFE. He'll poison himself!

HODGE. You have such fancies.

HODGE'S WIFE. Tell him you were mistaken, it isn't arsenic. Run, take it away!

HODGE. Don't be silly.

Scene Ten

In his garret, Chatterton pours the arsenic into a glass of water. On his table are papers which he tears up, strewing the pieces on the floor. He reads aloud Item: one poem, one shilling; item: one article, five pounds; two songs, one shilling; one squib . . . *He tears up the sheet.* Dear Doctor Barrett: I implore you by your former kindness to help me to a position on an African brig. I have come to the end of my resources and have neither strength nor prospects to strengthen me. *He tears it up.*
One month and no answer. *He tears up manuscripts until the floor is covered.*
Trash, trash!
Tories, Whigs, Lord This, Lord That. England.
Will England last longer than Rome or Egypt?

It will not outlast the Earth.
What have I to do with these, to build arguments
For the Court, against the Court,
That I may eat, lodge, and write more arguments.
If men were like winds with no important bellies
That fill, empty, and must be filled daily—
But to write this over and over
That I may live,
Teach my feet to walk to prose,
Cant, rant, smart as any . . .
I might eat there.
Will they not tire of it?
What money can there be in my traffic with the moon?
What is your business? Did they not ask to-night?
And afterwards surely.
What is the business for a man?
Sell clothes or grain,
Ride waves, furrow the earth, the gull's companion or the ox's;
Build houses or a bridge for men to crawl upon,
Try to comprehend the world in whose sky
Earth is only a star?
These green grains of arsenic
Will dissolve the Earth
Into the nothingness that once it was;
Unflesh me of my hungers, those persistent curs
That stick to my heels;
Pull out the riddles worming in my brain,
And write the answer zero
To the subtraction.
Too long a grace over so little meat. *He drinks the poison.*

Scene Eleven

The same room at night.

CHATTERTON *at the window.* The street-lamps under the clouded night
Have made the sky grey. Half the Earth
Is dark. In the universal night
The day was a little shelter.
"Is it not beautiful," they would say
Of light. Burning-glass,
Resting your spot of light on me,
When floor and street were stinking hot,
I am rid of you;
No longer to fly about you, sun, with other moths,
Because I burn.
Rid of you, too, broken trinket
In the rhinestone glitter of stars,
Unburied corpse, swelling and misshapen,
Eaten away by those white ants, the stars.
Shine, sun and moon, for those at ease;
For these you are beautiful;
But to me, caught in this street,
A small cloud travelling across a cloudy sky,
A stick now caught in the surf,
Being drawn away, now flung ashore,
To be drawn away again,
A poisoned rat that slowly leaves his hole—
If I were Samson
To push these walls away.

Scene Twelve

An alley into which Chatterton enters from a crowded street.

CHATTERTON. I place anger upon my head like an iron crown, hurting my temples;
I would fillip the carriages and speed them screeching away;
Like a truckman, lashing his horses
Until they pound the stone pavement with broad hoofs,
Strike and strike.
If I had the anger of a cloud,
I would scoop up rain in my palms and fling it upon the people, bowing heads and hurrying into doorways;
Then with lightning I would split the houses,
And fire cover the ruins like a sudden fungus . . .
Pile up cities, trample grass into pavement, for every tree, chimneys;
With your steep hills of brick, cover the earth;
My resignation is tendered . . .
Pity these walls, winds and rain,
Pity these habitations of men . . .
Will London, too, be a waste like Babylon?
They will build again by other rivers . . .
Will they not be tired at last as I am,
When they have dragged the unknown merchandise—
If the wagon carries any—
In reins and blinkers,
Have made the same turns and gone the same streets
Often enough?

CHATTERTON *climbing to the top of a hill.* These
trees with many arms stretch out and up
To hold me. So is life sweetened
To make it palatable.
Desires, satiety, our uncertain doom and of those dear
to us,
Human ills like numbering itself,
Senses and mind make endurable:
As in the taste of food, for which we try much tasteless,
stale, or rancid;
As in a few words' meaning, for which we hear
So much trite and foolish.
For keener sight we pay with keener sight
Of ugly streets and ugly men and women.
The good, itself part pay for sorrow, the lure to keep
us living,
Through our senses and our minds
We must pay back with usury.
If we play red or black, we lose.
Still, the players have the game's excitement.
But must I sit it out? Surely a loser
May leave early.
I'll take no more goods, pay
No more bills. Although a little sooner than the rest,
File a bankruptcy petition;
The store locked, the blinds down, the clerks discharged.
Beautiful striped fabric, green and blue of day and the
dark band of night,
Embroidered so closely and ingeniously,
I cannot handle you at a profit.

Business is bad,
Or, perhaps, I am a bad business man.
Now let me deal in the plain black shoddy of death.

Scene Fourteen

CHATTERTON. Ocean, bitter salt water, larger than continents, incessantly troubled,
In whose cold night the fish and knotted sea-weed have their being,
Feeding upon each other and drowned men—
Loud in my own ears,
At a little distance I am dumb, mouth open, shrill and dumb;
As here those other waves are silent,
An edge of white along the black water.
Silence is more dignified than speech;
Certainly more dignified than ineffectual speech;
And dignity is most dignity
In the stiff, persistent pose of death.
Let me be dignified at last. Let me,
Chatterton, the scrivener's apprentice,
The listener-in at circles of the great in coffee-houses,
The great-eyed watcher from the walks of those
In carriages or on horses, be dignified as any.
He who was hungry shall himself give food,
And who was badly clothed and sheltered, shall himself
Be a lodging. Munificence of death . . .
Beautiful, you were beautiful, sea, and beautiful was your companion, land.
But what is beauty merely? A beautiful woman,
Seen often enough, her skin is skin,

Hair, hair, eyes, eyes, nose, nose, mouth, mouth,
Blurred into a face.
I am a drunken man who leans aside, vomiting,
And from his other side pushes the woman.

Scene Fifteen

A square in the city at night. On the benches are seated men and women, among them Chatterton.

A GIRL *to Chatterton.* Jolly in the workroom, all the girls at tables;
As they work, they laugh and chatter to each other,
Laugh and chatter at each other.
Now and then, the old forewoman screams;
And all are silent for a moment,
Then begin to whisper,
And are laughing, chattering noisily as ever;
Until the old forewoman screams,
And all are silent for a moment, but a moment.
The heavy white-washed timbers of the ceiling,
The red brick walls, unplastered and unpainted—
I make believe that I am in my castle sewing
And the others are my maids about me, all my maids in rows along the hall;
The old forewoman, rudely interrupting,
Is a parrot, that my lord and master brought me from the east;
And we all are sewing brocade, pearls and gold thread upon velvet,
For my lord and master and myself . . .
What we sew is shoddy and we sew on wooden buttons, painted black to look like bone,

Sewing fast with hard, stout cotton;
And I laugh out shrilly at the girl who sits beside me,
And we all laugh out together,
And we try to make each other small as each one knows herself;
Only to the old forewoman we speak gently,
And when we catch her looking, we sew away, away...
When the streets in winter are still befogged with night,
Or early summer mornings when the sky is blue and cool—

ANOTHER GIRL. Why should she complain who is out
Among others, making friends with girls and, perhaps, men;
While I have to stay at home among pots and dishes,
The broom's companion.

AN OLD WOMAN. Why should either of you talk,
Young and strong. The old should complain,
Servants to our daughters and our sons' wives.
Scolded and taught—much good it does us now—
We hold our mouths close:
No use talking to the young and wise.
We sit beside the stove. Our spoons shake
As we lift them to our lips;
We spill food over ourselves,
Dirty with age. The hair has fallen
From our scalps, leaving us bald women;
And into the deep wrinkles of our faces,
Dirt sifts. We keep staring
Out of flabby eyes. Strength has gone from us.
We had just begun making ourselves comfortable,

Now our children are grown up, we had been saying,
Now we know that we are neither to be great nor rich,
Let us rest a while,
Let us begin to take pleasure in our lives,
Such as they are; and saying so,
Found ourselves old.

AN OLD MAN *to Chatterton.* Aren't you sick of stories of the poor?

But if we knew Caesar or a scholar like Abelard,
Perhaps we should wonder
How easily men become great among men;
And if we could see Helen herself, we might say,
I have seen such.
The great and little hang from the mind,
Leaves of a tree until the winter of death;
Again and again, the mind stirs to a noisy life
Lives of many, pebbles along its shore;
But are you not eager to forget the faces of men and women
And your own ugly face?

A WOMAN. Look at the froth on his lips!

ANOTHER WOMAN. He has poisoned himself!

MERIWETHER LEWIS

Scene One

Sioux warriors with scalp sticks are dancing about fires to the noise of drums.

A YOUNG SOLDIER. The Mandans warned us,
Captain Lewis, how treacherous these Sioux are;
In the frenzy of this dance, is there nothing to fear?

LEWIS. Show no fear and there is nothing to fear.

THE SOLDIER. Their dancing files are about our scattered men;
Would it not have been better to have kept together?

LEWIS. That would have shown us afraid.
They do not know our strength, seeing us calm;
Keep calm, and they will not know our weakness.

THE SOLDIER. I wish that we were out of this.

LEWIS. The way through is the way out.
Any other way is harder. Do and do,
Like the witches in Macbeth; but do not stop
To value what you do: it is pastime . . .
Ferocity is painted on their faces;
But if they should turn upon us,
Men are not Promethean to live forever, tortured.

Scene Two

An expanse of snow in the mountains. Lewis and another are hardly able to walk.

LEWIS. Here they went.

THE OTHER. What's this?

LEWIS. Horse guts. They have killed a horse for food.

THE OTHER. Here is the head.

LEWIS. The lips have flesh.

THE OTHER. The head is frozen hard. They must have gone by yesterday.

LEWIS. Let's carry the head to that cleft and build a fire.

This was Clark's horse, I think. See the white forehead.
When we cut off your lips, horse, you will begin to grin.

THE OTHER. I can't walk now. Let's rest a moment.

Is it beginning to snow? Is that snow or stars?
Do you feel snow falling?

LEWIS. Nothing is falling. All is frozen fast;
The stars are frozen to the sky and these snow-covered mountains,
Rising behind each other, are frozen to their base.

THE OTHER. Men live and work and what they are—
Snowed under with their Earth at last.

LEWIS. What we are
Is born on other stars—in turn to die there;
And what men in their orbits signify, the stars signify and that is—.
We whose lives are in years bother about
Timeless matters; and daily see
The bright roof, our sky, dissolving into darkness.
What follows a straight line may end somewhere,

But stars go in circles.
I throw my head spinning to the stars . . .
Come on now, and we two Salomes help each other with this head. *They do so.*

Scene Three

Night. The Pacific surf is heard. Lewis' and Clark's men break camp.

ONE *of the men waiting for the start, to another.* I am so sleepy . . . I wish that I could sleep, crawl into my own bed between the cool sheets, in my own room in my own house . . .
The last time I was on furlough, a farmer gave me a lift. I fell asleep and when I woke,
I was beside the wide, blue Hudson, the water twinkling with sunshine, and the cart taking me home.
To be coming up that road now, even if the sky were grey and the coldest wind blowing, chunks of ice hiding the water . . .
If I could only get a little sleep. While we wait, I'll just close my eyes, just close my eyes a little . . .

THE OTHER. There's something in the bush, listen! . . .

THE FIRST. A ship at the river's mouth, traders' ships along the coast, and after all—no ship.
Now all over again,
Indians, rowing, portages, mountains, portages, rowing, and Indians.

THE OTHER. Listen, something in the bushes . . . listen . . .

A village on the Mississippi. A cannon and cheers are heard. Lewis, Clark, and citizens enter.

A CITIZEN. Well, Captain Lewis, the country had given up hope of your returning.

ANOTHER CITIZEN. Gone three years.

THE FIRST CITIZEN. You're the next president, if you choose to be. They were talking of Congress voting land, if you'd get back. *Turning to Clark* They ought to make it ten thousand acres apiece. Jefferson will make you the governor of Missouri, Captain Lewis.

And we need a good man what with all that's going on. Frontiers get the riff-raff. The steady, decent people stay back home; those with a screw loose, loafers, goal-birds, and bankrupts in the States float here.

A THIRD CITIZEN. The whole country is going to hell. A man from New York was here and he tells me the papist Irish are landing there in droves. You can see them any day coming from the Battery, in rags, not a penny to their name, drunk the lot of them; men, women, and brats boozing from the same bottle. This will be a fine country in nineteen hundred and six with those breeding in it.

We've kicked out George the Third to have the Pope instead.

THE SECOND CITIZEN. A minister had an article about it in the ladies' journal my wife gets.

THE THIRD CITIZEN. There's not much use bothering about this part of the country. Down the

river they had an earthquake a while back. That's the kind of a country it is. And there ain't a river like the Mississippi in all the land. It'll change its course overnight and wipe out a township. A man that'll farm beside that river is a fool; and a town that's built beside that river is a town of fools.

THE FIRST CITIZEN. Some folks around here, Captain Lewis, are more trouble than any river. Let me tell you—well, after dinner. Come on, gentlemen. *The citizens walk on.*

CLARK *to Lewis.* Why do you act towards them with such respect?

LEWIS. I, too, thought respect ought to be deserved; Now I simulate respect out of pity.

CLARK. You should attack; you mislead them into thinking their littleness affirmed.

LEWIS. I am not interested in attacking littleness.

CLARK. Everything on Earth is little, if it comes to that.

LEWIS. It has. *They follow the others.*

Scene Five

LEWIS. I am Meriwether Lewis;
Blood not the least in Virginia, ancestors
Back me up;
Am trained to read and untwist
Meanings to the first strands;
To outride and outshoot many;
Have money enough, am not like most
Indentured to a room, nor fenced

Within a county;
But within the scoop of sugar
The grocer used in filling up this paper bag,
So plump and neatly tied,
Were ants.
Perhaps, the leasehold in our bodies
Is held in trust.
So many strings,
That if we fall, what else
Falls also, or what bells are jangled—
I asked for work so huge, laborious, needing so much time,
That taking it away in shovelsful,
I might forget myself.
Mr. Jefferson commissioned me
To go through the unknown lands
Westward. The world has still too many tyrannies
For our republic to be content
With narrow limits. Like a man against a cliff,
I kept my mind upon the work in hand,
And dared not look away from the next grasp and foothold.
The work is ended.
What is worth doing now? Administer
The petty laws?

CAPTIVE ISRAEL

Scene One

Mark Antony among his soldiers. A messenger enters with gifts.

MESSENGER. These from Herod of Judea.
ANOTHER MESSENGER. And these.
ANOTHER. And these.
ANOTHER. And these.
A SOLDIER. A thousand Jews have come.
MARK ANTONY. With gifts?
THE SOLDIER. With complaints.
MARK ANTONY. Let them in. *The Jews crowd in.*
THEIR SPOKESMAN. We complain of Herod, the Idumean.
By bribing Cassius, your enemy,
He has power over us.
ANOTHER JEW. He has put many to death
Without consent of the Sanhedrin, our judges.
MARK ANTONY. Let him be your tetrarch. *The Jews shout in protest.*
MARK ANTONY. Herod is Rome's friend, you are enemies. *The Jews keep protesting.*
To his soldiers. Stab some of those barbarians for me.
The soldiers rush upon the Jews, who rush away shouting, except those left wounded or dead.

Scene Two

John Hyrcanus is teaching his grandson, Aristobulus, from a map. The boy's sister, Mariamne, listens.

JOHN HYRCANUS. All this is Rome.

ARISTOBULUS. How can so wicked a people become great?

JOHN HYRCANUS. North are the Germans and the Scythians.

ARISTOBULUS. What are they?

JOHN HYRCANUS. Savages.

ARISTOBULUS. And north of these?

JOHN HYRCANUS. The cold sinuous ocean of fish and crabs.

ARISTOBULUS. And east of us?

JOHN HYRCANUS. Savages.

ARISTOBULUS. South of us?

JOHN HYRCANUS. Savages.

ARISTOBULUS. What is your husband, Mariamne?

MARIAMNE. Grandfather, your Earth is like the room
In which I lived alone,
Until I knew the spider hiding near his webs,
The flies, the mice that sometimes scampered in the cupboard,
A centipede sometimes on the wall;
Ten thousand ants were in each window-sill;
My home was also theirs,
I one among a host of these.

JOHN HYRCANUS. We have become too delicate and proud,
Too thoughtful. Such die.

MARIAMNE. Are killed.

JOHN HYRCANUS. Perhaps your husband who is of their blood will save us.

MARIAMNE. To save us from beasts you have brought a beast among us.

JOHN HYRCANUS. Herod loves you.

MARIAMNE. Yes, if to beslabber me is love,
Lock me in his hairy arms,
Stab whoever looks at me too long,
But if also to hold dear my self that is not body—
He knows nothing of it.

JOHN HYRCANUS. We live at such a time and among such.

Scene Three

Midnight. Herod and Mariamne enter.

HEROD. The stars, the moon, the houses and trees are alone at last . . .
This will I do for you, Mariamne:
Build you a tower taller than the trees—
From which to watch the world . . .
You are not pleased.
Silks, pearls, peacocks, negroes—
Nothing pleases.
Cleopatra is more easily pleased.
Perhaps, because I am not Antony.
Wait, Mariamne; from captain of a troop
I became tetrarch, and now king.
What shall I do for you, Mariamne?
Tell me what it is that makes you unhappy.
Because the Parthians took away your grandfather?
He has been freed. He is honoured among the Jews at Babylon.

If you wish, I'll write to him to come.
He shall have a palace and will end his days
At peace in Zion, now that I am king.
I will depose the high-priest and make your brother
high-priest,
If you wish.
He shall appear before the people on the holidays;
They will rejoice, he is beautiful as you.
Aristobulus shall be high-priest, Mariamne.
He shall be high-priest,
And I will send for John Hyrcanus, too;
Because he is your grandfather and honouring him,
I honour you;
Otherwise would I send for one who has been king
In my stead and still has followers?
Here comes Joseph.
I must go to Alexandria—to Antony.
Our Joseph will rule in my place.
Go, my Mariamne, it is late,
And we who rule this turbulent people
Have much to talk about. *She goes out. Joseph enters.*
Uncle, I have been unable to find out
What lies or truth made Antony
Send me this summons.
But if you hear that I am put to death,
Stab her.
When I am dead I would not have another
In my place.
Promise me this, Uncle, by our relationship,
By your white hairs which I have loved to honour,
Promise me this.

You had better not look at her too long before you stab.
If you were to see her face, perhaps you could not stab.
Yet if you stole up behind, might not her hair, her neck
and shoulders
Stop you?
And then if she turns you could not stab.
And why not? You are my kinsman under oath to serve
me,
Whose white hairs I have loved to honour.
Will you promise, Joseph?
Give me your hand.

Scene Four

John Hyrcanus, his ears cut off, seated among the chief Jews of Babylon.

JOHN HYRCANUS. Herod has written me.
The Alexandrian whom he made high-priest
He has unmade; and since I,
Because the Parthians did this to me *pointing to where his ears were*
Cannot officiate, my grandson
Aristobulus is named high-priest. *His hearers murmur approval.*
And I myself invited to return. *His hearers shout and gesticulate their disapproval.*

A JEW. Among us in Babylon you are safe.

ANOTHER. Aristobulus is made high-priest to trap you.

JOHN HYRCANUS. Why should Herod wish me harm?

I am content that he is king
And that his wife, my Mariamne, is the queen.
You know that my delight is in study.
When I was ruler I did my best to rule;
Now that I am not, I am content.

A JEW. Herod goes to Alexandria to be tried by Antony
And now placates the people.
When he's back, he'll show himself again.

ANOTHER *to John Hyrcanus.* But should Herod not come back, you in Judea
Are easily king again.

JOHN HYRCANUS. I do not want to be.
If Herod means me harm he goes away.
If Herod fears harm why send for me
And he not there to meet what I might plan?
And if no harm from me why have me killed
And anger needlessly our people?
I am safe in going.
I am not at home except in Zion,
Our fathers' land, our children's too, I hope;
All Babylon is friendly—and alien.
The place where we are born still is home.
There we feel the heat cannot make us faint.
We understand the sky, the shrubs, the houses,
In the streets the men we meet and met.

A JEW. Zion, how can we forget you;
How pleasantly sounds your name, Jerusalem.

In Mark Antony's palace at Alexandria.

HEROD'S SECRETARY. The courier has come.

HEROD. What does the queen write?

THE SECRETARY. The queen has not written.

HEROD. Whose letters then?

THE SECRETARY. Joseph's and Salome's.

HEROD. Read.

THE SECRETARY. To King Herod from his uncle, Joseph:

Because he is Maccabean,
The high-priest Aristobulus is acclaimed.
It is whispered he should be king as well.
Shall he die?
His grandfather, John Hyrcanus, has returned.
Shall he die?

HEROD. Read on.

THE SECRETARY. To King Herod from his sister, Salome . . .

HEROD. Read. Why do you stop?

THE SECRETARY. Joseph and Mariamne are much together
Under pretence of the state's business.
I have come upon them suddenly
And she flushed.

HEROD. Stop . . .
What else is written?

THE SECRETARY. Nothing.

HEROD. Read.

THE SECRETARY. Nothing else is written, King.

HEROD. Let me see.
Salome's letter is the shorter.
What has the queen written?

THE SECRETARY. Nothing.

HEROD. Write to Joseph:
I return.
Antony has received me graciously
And confirmed my kingship. *Lictors enter, followed by Mark Antony.*

MARK ANTONY. Herod,
I have heard that the lad, the high-priest Aristobulus,
Is beautiful.
Send him here. *Herod bows. Mark Antony is followed by Roman and Levantine soldiers, priests, and officials. Herod joins these.*

Scene Six

In Herod's palace at Jerusalem.

HEROD. Where is she now, Joseph?

JOSEPH. In the garden.

HEROD *at the window.* How the wind folds her clothes about her
As she runs . . .
I never knew that she could be so merry.
Who throws the ball to her?

JOSEPH. Her brother, the high-priest Aristobulus.

HEROD. Poor children . . .
Have her told that I am come.
I will join them in the garden. *Joseph goes out. Herod goes to the door and returns with the executioner.*

To the executioner. The queen is playing with her brother in the garden.
I, too, shall play with them at ball.
Go now and hide in the bushes near the carp ponds.
It may happen that the ball, thrown here and there
By the three of us, will fall beyond the hedge.
Aristobulus will come to look for it.
Then from behind clap your palm across his mouth
And hold him in the water till he drowns.
And leave him . . . so that it seem
He slipped and fell
And struck his head upon the curbing and so drowned.

Scene Seven

Herod, his head wrapped in a cloak, enters; then Mariamne, supported by two of her women; the court follows. The wailing of women is heard. Herod seats himself.

HEROD. Let him be buried in the splendour
That suits our brother.
Let there be no stint of linen and spices
For the body, nor marble for the tomb.
There let them chisel and fill in with gold
His name, his birth, his office, and his death,
And some long passage from the holy writings . . .
How treacherous, Brother!—
To come home to find the usurper, death.
Let no one tell his grandfather.
I will break the news to him myself . . .
To have the staff he leans upon, so rudely
Knocked from his hand
In his old tottering age.

You were too beautiful, Aristobulus.
The weeds along the roads survive;
But you apart in palace and in temple
Drew our eyes
And that malignancy in the world's affairs
That blackened you with death.

Scene Eight

John Hyrcanus is reading. Herod enters. After a while John Hyrcanus seeing him

JOHN HYRCANUS. Herod! . . .
Rising You have come to me
Who ought first to have gone to you
And given thanks . . .
Walking slowly across the room I did not know
That you were back from Alexandria . . .
And I wonder that no servant met you
To tell me you are here—
But you were always the simple soldier
That does not stand on ceremony.
Kneeling before Herod and looking up at him Know, King
Herod, that I who was the king
Try to forget that unhappy time
When my subjects' troubles were my own
And I powerless to stop the Romans,
Or Syrians, or Parthians—all those
Who crowd this corner of the world
And cannot let us live.
I would rather study these *pointing to his books*
Than be troubled by affairs of state.
I, too, am thankful that you have given us peace

And that you must be the ruler and not I.

HEROD *putting his hands on John Hyrcanus' shoulders.*
He who once is king, must be king.
Although he abdicates
To some he still is king.
If I brought peace to Zion
And am to bring peace, I cannot have
A rival house.
I come to tell you that your grandson
Is dead. *He has choked John Hyrcanus to death and runs to the door, shouting* Come here! Your master's dead!
The servants enter. I told him of Aristobulus' death and he—
When trouble comes . . .

Scene Nine

In the garden of Herod's palace at twilight.

MARIAMNE'S MOTHER. I know Cleopatra's flute-player, a Jew.
I have written him
To tell Antony how beautiful you are.

MARIAMNE. What have I to gain by changing Antony for Herod?

HER MOTHER. Do you compare the Roman who divides the Earth
With Augustus
To this Arab?

MARIAMNE. What ugly, substantial figures
Are woven into this fabric—
I like to think as gutturals and sibilants in a psalm . . .

What vexation in our business, living—
And the supreme vexation, death.

HER MOTHER. You are too much your grandfather.
How did Herod's father from the beggar that he was
Become the prince he died?
So these vulgar Romans make for what they want
Not in meditation,
But with blows, with coin.
Here comes Herod, murderer of boys and old men—
After you, sister and daughter of the murdered.
Toad, catch the sun now within your tree,
In the basket of brown branches.
Here she is, your Mariamne.
If I could burn you in a blaze of words,
If speech were not too weak a poison . . .
He may not see us here.
Now the housewife washes herself, combs and brushes her hair.
Rosy and smiling she comes to light the candles.
But we queens
With our dead,
Hate corroding us . . .
Mariamne, if Antony were to love you,
He would tumble this fat Arab from the night-stool, his throne,
And make you a queen like Cleopatra—
You are more beautiful than she.

MARIAMNE. I hate Antony as I hate Herod.
I hate you all.

How utterly alone I am! *She leans against the trunk of a tree and sobs.*

HER MOTHER. You fool!

I leave you to your Herod. Here he is. *She goes out.*

HEROD. Who just left you? Joseph? . . .

I have angered you again, Mariamne.

With those I hate I can be swift and sure,

With you I blunder . . .

My love warns you of my hate,

This love that travelling alone

Can reach no higher and from its meridian must sink at last

Until in blood it touches earth;

Because you, Mariamne, are stock-still.

If you would move with me,

Then is my love always at its noon.

Why are your hands limp in mine?

Have I kissed your lips so glum?

I might as well have talked to one of these *pointing to the trees*

And yet an insensate tree

Knows the sun from which its life is drawn.

Scene Ten

On the roof of the palace.

SALOME *leaning over the parapet.* Turbaned, into the sunshine, merchants on slow-stepping camels,

Lifted and sinking on the curved backs,

Bridles slack in their hands . . .

The trees are green clouds.

There is a little time to notice these things before night.

HEROD. Where is Mariamne?

SALOME. What have I, only Herod's sister,
To do with Mariamne, the last Maccabean, John Hyrcanus' granddaughter,
Unfortunately Herod's wife—
But stooping to Herod's uncle.

HEROD. Mariamne is justified in her contempt for you,
Not because you are not John Hyrcanus' granddaughter,
Because you are yourself, Salome.

SALOME. Because I watch my brother's honour I am so answered.

HEROD. Because you do not watch your own.
Your lie went through me like wind in a tree;
Ruffled me, yes, moved me not at all.

SALOME. I wrote of what I saw.
If nothing, nothing; if not, a clue.
She does not love you, this at least is so;
And your unhappiness is mine—somewhat.
You love her much, she loves you little,
You love her more, she loves you not at all,
You love at last to frenzy.
This may be natural, but we have heard
Of powder sprinkled on meats, potions in drink,
Salves rubbed on garlands or in sandles,
Necromancies—

HEROD. Be quiet, fool, barbarian . . .
If I could quiet myself as easily . . .
If I am not her husband, I am her king.
In prison, those hands and feet manacled,

If I had her scourged,
Her head cut off at last and left
The long neck spouting blood,
What have I to gain?
I have a most stubborn wife,
But what is more stubborn than a corpse? . . .
Still, in prison she may understand
How comfortable a palace is and what companion
King Herod.
Women are so animal
Words and pats are wasted,
But whipped, kicked, and ridden,
They turn gentle
Out of fear, then out of habit,
And at last from love,
With humid eyes and mincing steps,
Follow the sugar in her master's palm.
If not, damn her, let her lie,
Belly swollen, bleeding at the nostrils.

Scene Eleven

Mariamne in prison.

HER MOTHER. This is what you must do, Mariamne:

Ask forgiveness, seem to forgive.
Herod is so sorry
He would overwhelm you with favors.
A stroke
Will set him purring and rubbing at your skirts.
Among the rocks of this disordered world
We must be serpents.

Living is sinuous—in curves and curves;
Only man, the fool,
Tries to make straight lines.
Give in to Herod
And when we can—.
Come, come, my pet,
I'll bring you milk to wash yourself,
Your maids to do your hair, and the new gown
With its embroidery of peacock tails.
I'll tell Herod that you ask forgiveness.
A feast to-night! Come, say Yes.

MARIAMNE. This happened here:
Thinking of Aristobulus and Grandfather—
I did not cry—I think I cried my last
When Aristobulus was murdered—
Nor could I pray—I am not so important
As to talk with God about my troubles—
Thinking who were masters of the world
And who mastered and where I was
And who I am—for all I am—
I felt myself slipping and about to fall
Into space;
Bit my lips, tossed my head
And so it happened saw
That stretch of sand in moonlight.
For the instant I
Forgot Mariamne
And those that happened once to be
Her kin and those that are
Her husband and Antony.
That instant I imprisoned

Was so free that now
I can hope for freedom—
From neither Antony nor Herod but myself.
HER MOTHER. If Herod puts you in a pit or takes
those eyes away,
If his ax
Lops off your senses and that mind's
Beginning wisdom?
The sights even from a palace are as beautiful.
Let me go to Herod with your greeting;
And see your way to freedom,
Since you have the trick,
Beside Herod as now among his gaolers.
MARIAMNE. I should not have the mind—
I could be happy here, if let alone.
HER MOTHER. Do you expect quiet in the world?
Do you think Herod will let you stay?
You must come up to Herod's throne or must go down
To Herod's block.
I'll tell Herod that you ask forgiveness.
MARIAMNE. I am not good at lies.
In a while I should be here again.
Let him find some other woman.
HER MOTHER. You do not understand the man.
You must have him or he will have you killed.
MARIAMNE. I will not choose.
HER MOTHER. You do.

Scene Twelve

In the prison. Herod and an old woman.
HEROD. How hot it is in here. I shall faint.

The stink gives me a headache. *Herod leans against the wall, then moves away.*
The wall is wet.
Tell me, is not the queen—
I suppose she cries at times? . . .
Has she said nothing? . . .
Her cell is too pleasant.

THE OLD WOMAN. There is a cell without a window . . .
Another cell which your father built, a cage rather,
Too low in which to stand . . .
Then the pits.

HEROD. Have her lowered into one of these,
But if she calls for me,
Send me word. *He goes out and so does the old woman. After a while the guards pass.*

A GUARD *to the others.* It is a pity
To let such fruit go through our hands
Untasted.

Scene Thirteen

In the prison.

THE OLD WOMAN *to a guard.* She is not dead.
Last time the king was here he had me peek
Into her pit.
There was a greenish light.
I threw the torch down. It was she,
The light smeared upon her face,
Her hair in strings, the robe dragging in a puddle.
She turned,
But not before I saw
That I have lived to be more beautiful than Mariamne.

THE BLACK DEATH

Scene One

A room in a Jew's house in a town of western Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Two old Jews, the master of the house and a guest, have just dined. They say in a low voice the benediction after eating. After a pause

THE HOST. What news?

THE GUEST. In our Granada the Messiah has not come.
Some of us do well, some not so well.

THE HOST. To judge from what in our synagogue some say,
I thought that in Granada
Jews rode the clouds for carriages.
Thanks for your news of no news.
But have you not heard of a new sickness
Coming westward?

THE GUEST. I hear of this and that always.
Young, each new war I asked about
Eagerly, and what new book? I used to ask.
I saw then whatever is, matters,
But afterwards saw, matters slightly.
So deeply rooted in the Earth is Man,
Nothing to the tree can matter much,
Until in its own time it age and die.
Why still be fluttered
By news of doctrines and kings' policies,
Even disasters?

THE HOST. But if this wind
Carry you away?

THE GUEST. It will.
Tell me about my room,
My street, my chair or dish, about the sun
Or night. I like the rough touch of bread,
The warm smell it has, the brown loaf
Upon the table, the room with this sunlight
On the floor, or at night
The candle's glow against the darkness.
THE HOST. This sickness worries me: have debtors
Here and there, and then, life itself—
My daughter . . .
Doctors see death many times, but a doctor is in tears,
When his own mother dies. If you thought
This sickness would come home, you too
Could not shake off this news so lightly.
Do you know that Christians, in debt to us,
Say that we spread the plague?
THE GUEST. When we were in Egypt, a Pharaoh came
Who knew not Joseph. When Charlemagne was emperor,
He sent for us. Charlemagne is dead.
A time to read holy books in rooms
Whose windows open upon gardens—
Does not winter follow summer?
They had it well and we must have it ill.
Is this news?
THE HOST. That Judah had his own land back
And we were in our walled town, Jerusalem;
That we were ploughing our own land,
And that our poets spoke their own speech,

Not Aramaic or Spanish.

THE GUEST. Had Israel a land? Was Canaan ours,
Which we took a while and never held
Against Assyrian or Roman?
When Solomon was king was the land Israel's?
"My father punished you with whips,"
Rehoboam said.
Palestine was a halting-place,
One of many. Our kin, the Arabs,
Wander over their desert. Our desert
Is the Earth. Our strength
Is that we have no land.
Nineveh and Babylon, our familiar cities,
Become dust; but we Jews have left
For Alexandria and Rome.
When the land is impoverished, as lands become,
The tree dies. Israel is not planted,
Israel is in the wind. Cut at the wind
With swords, set fires under it;
A little smoke a little while, the smoke
Uncurls and is gone. Take no threats to heart:
This may be the end of you and me;
But for all the grains of sand blown
From the desert, the desert is;
And all the waves that spill upon the shores
Leave the sea full.

THE HOST. Some get drunk on words, but I, like most,
Must have substance. Thanks for your words;
I offer wine. *He does so. Before drinking, they say the benediction in a low voice.*

The council chamber of the town.

THE FIRST COUNCILLOR. Month after month
and all day long, fog,
In which their sun was a yellow stain
And men and trees turned yellow
And then grey. At times the earth suddenly heaved
And shook.

THE SECOND COUNCILLOR. They say
Crowded China and India are dead.

THE FIRST COUNCILLOR. The Genoese fleeing
Crimean Caffa
Report Armenia covered with dead
Along roads, blocking streets of towns,
And in deserts caravans,
Their men, camels, and dogs dead;
The Kurds, fled to the hills and dying
On cliffs, in gorges; and ships, crews dead,
Blown about the Black Sea.

THE THIRD COUNCILLOR. What Noah's ark
can ride this flood?

THE FIRST COUNCILLOR. The dying Turks besieging Caffa
Tied their own dead instead of stones upon the catapults
And shot them to the city, where the Genoese
Scraped roofs and cobblestones,
Until the harbour bobbed with the bloody scraps
And the white bellies of dead fish.
Who could among the Genoese took ship

And fled—to die in Italy
And bring their kinsmen death.
Heathen and Christian, man and beast alike,
As if no God set man and beast apart,
No Saviour for the Christians.

THE THIRD COUNCILLOR. In Africa are cities
In which nothing lives. No smudge of fire upon the walls;
An enemy, not to be shot at, overcame them.

THE MAYOR *entering*. The plague is near. I have the news from Rudolph,
Back from his trading. At Coblenz half are dead, the rest in the fields,
From which the peasants drive them. And so elsewhere.
The citizens look to us; we must not in the thunder and lightning of these times
Become ourselves distracted. There are enough who will be.
Here and now we must consider how to save the city;
And if our means will not avail, as probably they will not,
What means we have to care for the sick, dead, and the remnant.
As to the known causes of this disease,
This is clear: it spreads from man to man.
The sick poison the sound by touch or breath,
Or by the body's odour; for, it is said,
The sick at once decay. We must decree, therefore,
That no one come within our walls, stranger or former townsman.

THE FIRST COUNCILLOR. Rudolph has come.

THE MAYOR. From Rudolph we have learnt our danger.
Let no one in; let in no merchandise.

THE THIRD COUNCILLOR. What good are walls,
What good decrees, when you wall in
The Jews with us?

THE SECOND COUNCILLOR. The plague, Jews say, is their Messiah.

THE FIRST COUNCILLOR. They may be innocent or they may be guilty—
Who knows? We know that they are strangers,
Who lived among Chaldeans and Assyrians,
And are suddenly here
In our everyday streets, this fourteenth century.

THE MAYOR. My people! like a lost traveller,
Who fears on each bough a beast's implacable hate.
But even if the Jews are harmless, they should be watched
To quiet those of us who fear them and, perhaps,
They are not harmless. Let all of them be shut up in one house.
Let their wealth be taken into our fund;
Apart, they still are part of us,
And must bear our sorrow with their own.
But let a watch be set about the house
That none go in or out, and that none
Still harm those whom we now harm.
But for all decrees, whether we live or die,
Turns on a game of chance in which we are
The coins, of some value, each with a human face;

This kept, but this, from the same die—
The mayor pitches across the table and vomits a stream of blood. The others, aghast, go out.

Scene Three

Before the house of the Jews. The guard calls to a passer-by.

THE GUARD. Neighbor!

THE PASSER-BY. My daughter is dead.

THE GUARD. She?

THE PASSER-BY. She, too.

I wrapped her in the sheet in which she lay
And carried her beyond the walls.
Now I am plague,
Breathing plague, carrying plague in my hands.

THE GUARD. You might have waited
Until those whose work it is
Took care of her?

THE PASSER-BY. The rich
With jewels in their ears and linen bed-clothes
Are cared for. Who takes care of us?
Among scavengers who carted in the dead,
Were fathers and mothers dragging dead children
And children dragging dead parents.
I left her in a pit, deeper than a man unhelped could climb from,
Shallow with dead.
She who loved whatever lived, and at work,
Stroked dishes and furniture,
Tore at herself,
As if to pull up the thick root, her heart,
And end the plague's violence.

THE GUARD. She was not alone in suffering.

THE PASSER-BY. So much the worse.

THE GUARD. If good times pass, bad times also pass.

THE PASSER-BY. Yes, we shall rebuild.
We have the spider's stubborn mechanism:
To stop and reason is to starve and die . . .
So you are still on guard.
The magistrates can still spare men to guard
The Emperor's precious Jews.

THE GUARD. We guard ourselves.
Some say that they have seen
Jews blowing plague upon us in Eastern dust.

THE PASSER-BY. Have Jews brought this plague?

THE GUARD. It is said so.

THE PASSER-BY. I would dig into their flesh!
Hurting may be a cure for hurt.
Can I revenge myself upon the stars,
Or whatever makes this this or that that,
My daughter live and then my daughter—dead?
If Jews bring this death, the world's intelligible . . .
But if Jews brought this death, who is the principal
Of these agents?
Jews, sea-hydras, lions, rats, and vermin
We kill, rightly we think; these, small as ourselves.
We cannot reach beyond our reach,
And so are not to see beyond our sight . . .
Jews, I have had too much of death
To kill.
Kill or be killed, I am indifferent.

A crowd enters, circling about three musicians. Their instruments are a large drum, a viol, and a pipe. The viol and pipe play snatches of jolly songs. As he talks, the drummer beats his drum.

THE DRUMMER. Listen, all of you, plague-sick or to-be-plague-sick,
To my speech, like a Jew's speech, voluble,
Hot and salted with the name of God, his famous countryman;
Listen, you men and women, strutting like lunatics,
Each thinking himself or herself, god or goddess,
Or at least king or queen: be comforted, each of you, saith your prophet,
You are not Atlas to the world's stability.
Laugh, shout, scream, or weep;
Leap, stand, kneel, or lie down:
The heavens stay up, the world endures.
Death comes suddenly or slowly; be careless or take thought,
Death is a plague with which we are all infected.
What good will crying to the Lord for mercy do us?
Has He mercy upon fish or beetles?
The dogs are His; does He bother more about them?
Just, His tribes are equal.
Eat, drink, and be merry, it was said; to-morrow we die.
To-morrow, they said, meaning *some day*;
But for us it is literal: to-morrow we die.
What shall we eat and drink? have we money?
Take to-day, I answer, whatever you wish; to-morrow you die.
If you are made in God's image, be cruel

As He to just and unjust, wolves and cattle.
Take whatever you wish; to-morrow you die!
The Jews' house! *The crowd flings itself against the door. The flagellants are heard coming. The monk enters, staggering under a huge crucifix. He is followed by a procession of barefoot men and women, singing a hymn, in their left hands lighted candles. They whip themselves.*

THE MONK. The cherubim are hushed, and sorrowful
The Lord arises, looking down to us . . .
For our sins, O Lord, for our sins!

A FLAGELLANT. The Lord is just!

ANOTHER. Else disorder!

ANOTHER. The Lord is merciful!

THE MONK *pointing at the Jews' house.* Sinners have brought the plague upon us! *All push against the door. In the clamour are heard drum, viol, and pipe, and the flagellants' hymn.*

Scene Four

Within the Jews' house. Either side the door Jews, wrapped in prayer-cloths, stand at their prayers, rocking backwards and forwards. Now and then their chant is lifted into a wail. Suddenly the shouting outside and the pounding on the door stop. The Jews stare at each other. Then the door is struck a powerful blow. Those outside are using a beam as a ram. The blow is heard at intervals, like the beating of a heart.

Scene Five

Years later, within a Jew's house in the same town. The master of the house and a guest have just dined.

THE GUEST. If you have the time to-morrow,

Will you show me where the massacre was?

THE HOST. The first visit to our city?

THE GUEST. Yes. How do you live among the Gentiles now?

THE HOST. Not worse than you in Hamburg.

THE GUEST. Evil to Man—like the plague—and evil men do,

Like sores upon a healthy body,

Scab and fall off.

THE HOST. If the body is healthy—sores?

THE GUEST. Those at least are gone, your city once more crowded.

THE HOST. The disease is in the blood to break out again.

THE GUEST. We shall live through it as before.

THE HOST. A tree has new leaves many times,

But in the end the tree dies.

THE GUEST. Are not other trees left?

THE HOST. In the end

The land sinks under the sea.

THE GUEST. Are not other lands raised?

THE HOST. The Earth itself will crumble out of the sky.

THE GUEST. Will there not be other stars?

THE HOST. Far away.

THE GUEST. Plague and massacre, these at least are gone.

THE HOST. The dream is gone, not what caused the dream.

CORAL

Scene One

A field at night. Nat Turner crawls from under a stack of fence rails.

NAT TURNER. Sweet meat, pig's meat. Sweet meat.
Pig's the sweet meat.
And the best drink's apple brandy.
Gates were open, doors unlatched.
Take their guns and ride their horses,
Ride upon Jerusalem
And away to the Dismal Swamp.
Drops of blood were on the corn,
Standing in the quiet fields.
In the sun, that morning four times bigger than the sun we know,
A black fist.
You saw, niggers.
What you niggers say is mosquitoes' drone to me;
Speak on, Lord.
Overseer Brantley, a white man and an overseer,
And Nat Turner, black man and a slave,
Side by side went into Person's pond,
And there I baptised him and he baptised me.
You saw, niggers, yes, you did.
From the corn fields and cotton fields and tobacco fields
Come, darkies, to work no more.
They made for Jim Parker's to get his apple brandy.
They all got drunk at the cider mill except Old Nat.
When they had killed the Travises except the baby,
"Nits become lice," Nat said.

Nat's sword was blunt
When he tried to stab the Whitehead girl as she ran about screaming.
He struck with a fence rail until he had her dead.
They were caught, boiled into grease, their atomies
Each in two hundred and sixteen pieces.
Nat Turner isn't caught easily.
Served them right, wouldn't listen to the Lord,
Filled their bellies with cider, swilled and swilled.
But I listened,
O yes Lord,
Ever since that morning I stood behind the plough and heard You.
Small among small, I'd have known quiet.
They'll put cords upon my hands and feet,
Boil me into grease and give away my knobby bones.
The doors were open, the way was certain sure,
And in the twinkling of an eye all was lost.
Old Beck is in the furrows, another nigger holding to the reins.
It was my wild father that wouldn't be a slave.
It was my wild mother that tried to choke me at my birth.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Black night, black earth, you are my friends;
White sun, I've got to hide from you.

Scene Two

A man comes into the cabin from the fields. He washes himself and empties the basin beyond the door. His wife serves supper. They are too tired to talk, slow and stiff in movement. After supper

HIS WIFE. Tired, Jim?

THE MAN. Guess you're pretty tired, too.

HIS WIFE. Heard someone ridin' by this morning.

THE MAN. Talley. Says more of us coming.

HIS WIFE. What county?

THE MAN. Boone.

HIS WIFE. Heard of any from our county?

THE MAN. They'll come soon enough. Not going to let the Yanks outvote us.

HIS WIFE. I wish they'd come. You might have told me when you came in.
Bad news you'd tell quick enough . . .
This sure is the end of the world.

THE MAN. You knew what a farm was like—and new land at that.
You just be patient. There'll be lots of people soon
And we'll have a stretch of land all our own.
There'll be great crops out of this soil.
Then we can buy niggers to do the work.

HIS WIFE. That's a long way off, Jim.
What'll I do when the baby comes? What woman will you get to stay with me?
Oh, why was I taken out here?

THE MAN. That'll be all right.
I'll get a woman to help with the house and baby till you're on your feet.
I'll ride down to Maysville and hire a woman.

HIS WIFE. Where's your money? And who'll stay with me till you're back?
Oh, I won't be left alone.

And if something happens? If you'll not be back in time?

Oh, I won't be left alone.

THE MAN. Maybe they'll move in beyond the creek.

HIS WIFE. They won't until spring, you know that, not with winter coming on.

You're just trying to jolly me.

I don't believe anybody's coming—ever.

It's a lie. Talley never told you anybody's coming. It's a damned lie.

THE MAN. Well, somebody's coming.

HIS WIFE *frightened.* It's a gang.

THE MAN. Maybe our men, then it's all right.

I'll get the gun, anyway.

HIS WIFE. What'll we do if they're Northerners? Let's hide!

THE MAN. Where'll you hide? If it's us they're looking for,

They'll make a bonfire of the house.

Too late, anyway. *A knock at the door.*

HIS WIFE. Put down your gun. Maybe we can talk them out of harming us.

If they see you with a gun they'll shoot. *Those outside have broken in the door, and as her husband puts his gun down, enter.*

JOHN BROWN. We've come for you, my man. *He puts a hand on the man's shoulder.*

THE MAN. What for?

JOHN BROWN. You Southerners killed eleven of us to-day;

To-night I kill eleven of you—
That's John Brown's answer. *The man opens his mouth as if to speak. His wife catches hold of John Brown's hands. The man is pistolled. John Brown and his band rush out, and their horses are heard galloping off. She shrieks after them; then leans against the jamb of the open door, staring at the corpse in a growing pool of blood.*

Scene Three

A meeting in the parlour of a Boston merchant.

THE CHAIRMAN . . . Mr. John Brown of Kansas will tell of that unhappy land.

JOHN BROWN. Some here know me: tanner, store-keeper, dealer in woolens, and farmer—failure in all.

Now that I am grey and have grown sons,
I see that I must serve Another Master.
In a saloon at Topeka Jeremy Blodgett bets a pair of boots
That he brings back the scalp of the first Northerner he meets.
He mounts, meets in a gig upon the highway
A brother of the Congregational minister at Leavenworth. Blodgett shoots.
Two men—one, Reverend Martin White—drive up to a farm-house.
A young man comes out to help unhitch. They know him for a Northerner and shoot.
The dead man is my son, Frederick.
This is Kansas.

You in Boston shall not pray on cushioned seats, dine off china, and ride luxuriously to your warehouses,
When four millions are slaves in your own country, for no fault but that their God-given skin is black.
I say that you, too, will have to answer for this.

A MAN. What will you do with money you are trying to raise here?

Arm in Kansas or invade a slave state?

JOHN BROWN. Defend liberty.

To tell friends my plans is to inform enemies.
I am known and my plans must be trusted.

Scene Four

A room in a lodging-house. Knocking at the door.

COLONEL FORBES *is seated on the bed. To himself* Who in hell is that? *The knocking continues. After a while he gets up slowly and opens the door.* Well?

JOHN BROWN *entering.* Colonel Forbes? I am John Brown.

FORBES. If you're from somebody I owe money to, I have nothing.

BROWN. You fought under Garibaldi?

FORBES. Well?

BROWN. You must have learnt something of guerrilla warfare.

Will you join me in freeing four millions—not from political subjection
But slavery, unrhetorical slavery?
The negroes.

FORBES. If I'm paid.

Once when I heard of wrongdoing I burned.
I fought with Garibaldi in Brazil, too, and fought Rosas in Argentine.
Now I'm through. Old and fat, skulking from shopkeepers.
Young and strong, a man builds himself a business. I have lost my chances.
Well, if I'm a soldier, pay me and I'll fight.
Liberty! I don't give a whoop in hell.
I know my clothes, food, and prospects—of not having these.
Wife and child worse off for all I know.
What's your plan?

BROWN. Here's the United States. *He takes a map out of his pocket and unfolds it on his knees.* In these hills between North and South—

FORBES. Have you arms?

BROWN. We'll capture arms. Here's the arsenal at Harper's Ferry with a corporal's guard.

Slaves and poor whites hear of us and join.
A noble undertaking cannot fail—though a man may.

FORBES. Let's talk cash. How much can you give?
I'm sick of this wall-papered prison. I'd like to—
But that's the fool in me. Shall I get pay?

BROWN. Yes.

FORBES. An advance?

BROWN. If you must.

FORBES. I must.
When you bring it, we'll talk about plans; until then, mum.

BROWN. And if I don't?

FORBES. Mum.

BROWN. I'll be back—if I can raise the money.

Brown goes out. Forbes walks up and down.

FORBES *writing on the wall.* Forty dollars—that would bring Maria. Half, Seppi.
He'll not bring enough for both.
Most likely never come.

Scene Five

Within a Federal arsenal at night. The light is from a lantern on the floor. Two of Brown's men, one a negro, force open the door and enter. Then Brown enters. Brown looks about at the bales and cases. Oliver and Watson Brown enter.

OLIVER BROWN. We heard men riding off.

JOHN BROWN. Let them, Son.
Let the United States march against us—
And the world know in our indelible blood
Our cause.
Lend a hand here. *They push bales into place for a siege. John Brown begins a hymn. A shot is heard. They work on.*

Scene Six

The same room at dawn. John Brown and the negro are shooting through one window, Oliver and Watson through another. Oliver shot, walking towards the middle of the room, sinks to the floor. John Brown and Watson glance at him. They keep on shooting.

WATSON BROWN. Dad, Brother's shot. *John Brown does not answer. He keeps on shooting. Watson lifts*

Oliver upon his knee. Oliver is dead. His long beard, stiffened with blood, points at the ceiling.

JOHN BROWN *to Watson.* Get back, Watson. *He does so. They fire until soldiers break in a side door. Watson is shot down. John Brown rushes upon the soldiers, gun butt lifted. The lieutenant, lunging with his sword, catches it in Brown's belt and doubles him up. With the hilt in both hands he chops at Brown's head. The main door has been unbolted and through this a captain and soldiers enter. John Brown is on the floor. The negro is a prisoner. The captain walks up to Oliver's body. A soldier with his boot turns the body over. The captain looks at Watson's body near the window.*

THE CAPTAIN. Dead, too? *Those near the body nod. The captain walks up to John Brown, who has come to and propped himself upon an elbow, head and beard clotted with blood. Brown is left under guard.*

JOHN BROWN. Ollie's dead. Who's that by the window? Give me a hand, soldier. *The soldier does not budge.*

That's where Watson stood.

Calling Watson! . . .

We could have gotten away. They never would have had us

With all Kentucky and the Ozarks . . .

There's a dead man over there, my son Oliver;

But his blood lives on and on. See how it spreads.

Scene Seven

Part of an open air mass meeting. All face the platform offstage.

ONE OF THE CROWD *shouting to another.* Hey,

neighbor! Never knew you much on politics. *They push towards each other.*

THE OTHER. Well, I heard there'd be good speaking.

THE FIRST *to the other now beside him.* Little Douglas is a wonder.

THE SECOND. What's he for?

THE FIRST. Slavery.

THE SECOND. Who's against him?

THE FIRST. Abe Lincoln, a lawyer down Springfield.

THE SECOND. Any good?

THE FIRST. That's Douglas getting on the platform, the little fellow. *The crowd cheers.*

THE SECOND. Who's the tall fellow going to the front?

THE FIRST. That must be Lincoln. He's speaking first, I guess.

A THIRD. Ain't he the ugly one? *All become silent and crowd towards the platform.*

Scene Eight

President Lincoln at a desk. The attendant shows in a visitor.

LINCOLN. Sit down, Joe. How's Sangamon County?

JOE. Just wanted to meet an old acquaintance, if he'd know me, President Lincoln.

LINCOLN. How's New Salem?

JOE. Remember when you and Berry were the grocers?

LINCOLN. Poor Berry . . .
You get to know people and to—like them,
Then . . . *The attendant shows in a Quaker who looks like Lincoln.*
Sometimes they come back like you, Joe. *Lincoln and Joe shake hands and Joe goes out.*

THE QUAKER. We read in newspapers that since thee has been elected,
Southern states secede, take arsenals and navy-yards,
South Carolina fires upon Fort Sumter;
And thee in contention that the states cannot leave the Union
Calls for soldiers.
To save the Union!
From what—if thee is sure of winning?
Will these states not prosper if divided,
Men not marry, have children, work and play,
The sun not shine?
I never heard that Heaven took account
Of great or little states, but if account at all,
Of wounds and dead.

LINCOLN. And slaves.
Still, if I could have peace with not a negro freed—
But evil breeds evils and now this jinnee, war,
Which once unbottled is not easily corked up.

THE QUAKER. There is no war if the South is left alone.
Is thee sure that secession is unconstitutional?
If so are other ways than war slower and less sure?
Are there not Southerners who know how slavery keeps them poor?

Is there no law above the Constitution?
Must thee be a lawyer to the end? *A band outside begins to play "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave".*
"His soul is marching on."
Death is marching on!
Upon farms North and South and streets in ten thousand cities. *The music drowns him out.*

Scene Nine

The same room later. Lincoln's secretary enters.

LINCOLN. After a year and a half of war,
We who outnumber them are on the defensive—
And have spent lives as clouds rain.

HIS SECRETARY. Women are outside to ask pardon for their sons—captured deserters.

LINCOLN. If McClellan wins,
I'll give the rebel states a chance:
Come back or I proclaim the negroes free.

Scene Ten

The same room about a year and a half later. The room is dark. Outside it is raining steadily. Lincoln is sprawling on the sofa. Generals Grant and Sherman enter.

LINCOLN *rising.* Howduh. *They seat themselves.*
I tried not to meddle with the army
Until it seemed I had to and then—
Fredericksburg and all those uselessly dead.
I think you know your business, General Grant.
I have made you commander-in-chief.

GRANT. I need more men.

LINCOLN. I'll call them.

GRANT. I'll not get enough volunteers.
Draft them.

LINCOLN . . . I will, then.
The innocent—in blood and tears, with interest, compound interest, fines, and penalties . . .
I'll give you men, make them win.

GRANT. I'll grind up Lee's army by my numbers,
Although I grind away half mine.
Meanwhile Sherman will be in Georgia.

SHERMAN. And leave a desert.

Scene Eleven

A theatre gallery.

A MAN *to his neighbor, Walt Whitman.* We had been comforting ourselves that this God or that was near.
Suddenly we know ourselves alone.
On a little planet, covered thinly with light and air, in black space.
We understand that we are not important. *The audience cranes forward.*
There's the President, Walt.
How worn he looks! . . .
Well, the war is over, the generals are through;
Now his work begins. *The house is darkened. All become silent, their faces lit by their stage. A shot is heard below. Then shouts,* The President is killed! Lincoln's shot! *The sound of breaking chairs and shouts,* Clear the house! *A squad of soldiers, bayonets fixed, enter the gallery. They shout,* Clear out! Clear out! *Everybody is driven out.*

Der Spervogel knocks. A student opens the door and Der Spervogel comes in.

DER SPERVOGEL. Is Rashi home?

THE STUDENT. Our rabbi is in the vineyards.

DER SPERVOGEL. If he has gone to watch his men,
He must be here soon. It is night.

THE STUDENT. He has no men.

DER SPERVOGEL. Does learning among the Jews also bring so little?

THE STUDENT. Rashi cannot take payment for his learning.
He is only a custodian and must share it.

DER SPERVOGEL. Surely some of you are rich enough
To give enough to Rashi that Rashi
Should not have to spend his time in the vineyards.

THE STUDENT. Rashi must have work for his hands, too.
We are not to study only.

DER SPERVOGEL. If a man were to study day and night—
Life itself is too brief.
So brief we build heavens.

THE STUDENT. The day is long enough for the mind to do
What the mind can, and there is time enough
For other tasks. These the body has.

How else are we to understand our books,
Unless we marry, labour beside other men,
And walk the earth among trees and animals?

DER SPERVOGEL. I have heard that Rashi traveled far.

What adventures has he had?

THE STUDENT. Rashi studied the Law under his uncle, Simon the Elder,
Who had studied under Gershom ben Judah, the Light of Our Captivity;
Then Rashi studied at Worms under Jacob ben Yakar
And at Mainz under Isaac ben Judah, taught by Eliezar the Great;
Then Rashi taught and studied in this town, his birthplace;
And now when he is old, his commentaries almost finished,
He hears his grandsons expound the Law . . .
But can Rashi be happy knowing how
The crusaders murdered those among whom he studied,
The Jews of Worms and Mainz,
The Jews of Treves, of Speyer, and Cologne—
How many more who at the least were Jews? *A number of men come in, eyes lowered.*
Here comes Rashi. *Rashi and some of his students come in.*

DER SPERVOGEL *to Rashi.* I am a German who in my wanderings
Have stopped to see Rashi.

RASHI. And your name is?

DER SPERVOGEL. Der Spervogel.

RASHI. A name I know well.
For the joy your songs have given me I have long been thankful.
Sit by me.
And you who gather to one side,
Speak without fear. We are only men.
THEIR SPOKESMAN. Neither merchants nor owners of vineyards,
Neither poets nor learned in the Law,
We were tradesmen or servants merely,
When the crusaders stormed our homes
And gave us the choice of baptism or death.
Life had been so harsh to us—
If only we could live a little longer—
So we were baptised.
We are not Christians,
And neither will our own receive us now.
RASHI. Who speaks against these?
A STUDENT. As our fathers endured, so must our children.
We cannot have weaklings to breed with us.
ANOTHER. If these were lepers, would they not be kept apart?
So we who are always in a state of siege,
Cannot have those among us who by their cry
We surrender, when the assault is on,
Spread irresolution.
RASHI. They clung to life naturally as plants to earth.
Surely we who know so well the taste of tears,
Should forgive them.

Give me your hands. *They press near him and he takes each in turn by the hand.*
May you find in this world for our delight, delight;
The sun and moon light up the corners of your spirits,
And the wind blow from you all remembrance of sorrow. *He motions them to seats. When all are seated*

A STUDENT *reading from the Bible.* And Jacob was left alone: and there wrestled a man with him until day.

RASHI. In his dream Jacob was in a wilderness;
And in the sun the angel sang
In a voice that echoed and re-echoed.
As Jacob trod through the bushes each cried out against him.
The grains of sand took up the song, the distant cliffs,
The particles of air that build the heavens:
The wilderness sang against Jacob.

THE STUDENT. In his dream Jacob was in a room;
Along the walls was carved God in rows of lions' heads, of dogs', of apes', of hawks',
And in the room were files of priests and soldiers,
And file on file of workers, reaping, sowing, weaving, making brick, or building,
Each with its overseer, rod in fist;
Above sat Pharaoh,
And Jacob saw it was the Angel.
And Pharaoh said, Your God is a mirage,
You saw when in the desert; you, a stone,
In my pyramid that shall oppose the heavens
And keep off the eddies of the world,
While in the center safe I lie.

Jacob was in the wilderness again,
Among the bushes,
The shadows of whose twigs give no shade.

ANOTHER STUDENT. Then Jacob said, I will no longer wander about the corridors of the world.
I will take a city, olive trees and fig trees, fields of barley and wheat.
And he did. And the Angel came upon him from the east,
Like a bull. His wings stood stiffly from his shoulders.

ANOTHER. The Angel came upon him from the west
And said, The turbulence of many tribes is levelled into Rome.
Send prayers through all the empty sky;
I build roads and aqueducts and my triumphal arches
Of marble across the solid earth.

ANOTHER. In his dream Jacob was in a strange street
And the Angel met him, scimetar in hand,
And said, Should the hero fall in battle, what can the Sultan give?
Women to hold in the grave, a jewel to hang from his shroud?
Who will not bow to the Sultan—the captains cut off his head and leave the body to dogs,
Shall I do less for Allah?

RASHI. Jacob is like the stars
Which rise to their station,
Which the winds cannot blow away,

Nor clouds extinguish.
But we become names upon gravestones and upon books;
Our desire for the Law an inheritance
Among our grandsons.
It was good to labour, and after labour
It is good to rest.

At night upon a roof in Haran.

ABRAM. The stars we saw
When we sat on the roof of our own house
In Ur of the Chaldees, shine on us now,
On Nahor, Lot, and Abram, left of Terah, Abram,
Nahor, Haran, Lot,
And you and I as old as Terah then . . .
What he sought, our father did not find;
And from his grave we must begin his search.
Brief as our lives are, much may still be done;
Many leagues journeyed in the compass of a dream.
As I listened to the silence of our father's grave,
The vault of heaven cried—
And yet the flock grazing through the field
Heard nothing and not a bird was scared
Out of the terebinths—
Abram, it cried, stay not in Haran, journey on;
In you shall all the nations of the Earth be blessed!
The fire in these stars
That sends them on their courses through the night,
Burns in me too. I will not stay.
Iron, strong as it knows itself,
Placed in the soft and yielding water, rusts;
So I among this people.

NAHOR. If we may read the stars above us,
Surely we may learn from the plants at our feet:
From the mangrove, whose humble branches
Take root; it holds in many places;
It has no fear of the tides, but evergreen,

In its season is fragrant with flowers and fruit.
We who have lived here many years, who have learnt
Not easily the ways of the water here and the paths of the wind,
And whose father is buried here, one of us stay;
Send branches from this root; the others
Strike roots elsewhere,
Until wherever the tide reaches, we are found.

ABRAM. Stay then and flourish, if to go from here
Would make you unhappy,
As it makes me to stay.

Scene Two

Within the tent of Abram in the heat of the day. He is seated in the tent door.

SARAI. Why does not my lord sleep? Is Abram troubled?

ABRAM *after a while.* When I was young, I had much to learn,
And my mother's death, our brother's death, our wanderings from Ur,
Our father's death, our wanderings from Haran,
But my shadow lessened slowly, until I was at my noon, rich and strong;
Now our shadows lengthen and lengthen into night,
Now we are old and have not even what our father Terah had—
A son.

SARAI. Have you not Ishmael, Hagar's child?

ABRAM. Ishmael is of the desert, his mother's son.

SARAI. When you were small and weak, Abram, a child,
You listened to the wisdom of women—
The maidservants, your mother, and your nurse;
Now when your broad back is bowed and your bearded face
Sinks upon your chest,
And you know yourself again weak and small,
Listen to the wisdom of a woman—your wife, Sarai.
You have seen me angry and heard angry words from my lips,
But at heart I have always been at peace;
For we women learn young what men know late,
And though our lips rebel, our hearts are untroubled;
But men though their mouths are shut and they stroke their beards calmly,
Your hearts overflow with bitterness.
Early we learn that though we have our way
In trifles, the way of our life is not ours;
We know the master's hand early, father, husband,
And so that Master
In the hollow of Whose hand we are.
As we become women, we learn the first evil
Common to women;
Early we learn that evil is woven into life,
As a figure in the pattern of a rug.
Men are spoiled; their Master is not before their eyes,
They do not learn of His hand until late.
Sickness is not with you after the manner of women;
Trouble when it comes is new and bitter to your tongue.
But we have grown used to it, it was long since in our

diet.
Why should we trouble ourselves, who are troubled enough?
Let us be content;
How good to be still able to warm ourselves
At the sun,
And at night, how pleasant to rest in the shade
Of that tree whose leaves are the stars.
ABRAM. What men are these to walk so light and swiftly
Across the desert in the glare of noon? *Abram goes out to meet them and is heard to say*
Rest yourselves
And I will bring a little water and a bit of bread. *He comes into the tent and brings out water and food.*
THE VOICE OF THE FIRST STRANGER. When you left Haran, Abram, you were to serve multitudes;
Now you content yourself with comforting two or three.
ABRAM. When we are young, we think to hold the sun,
And find when we are older, we hold a candle.
THE VOICE OF THE SECOND STRANGER. Your spark
Will light a fire that shall burn
Through every nation,
And its sparks shall be the seeds of fire.
THE VOICE OF THE THIRD STRANGER. You who came to comfort, be comforted;
Your wife Sarai shall bear a son,

Whose sons shall be like the sands for number, like the stars.

Scene Three

The elders of the children of Heth in the gate of their town.

AN OLD MAN *comes in slowly. He leans against the wall. After a while.* Who were the strangers?

THE SECOND OLD MAN. Ask a younger. I have forgotten.

THE THIRD OLD MAN. Sarah, the wife of Abraham is dead.

THE SECOND OLD MAN. What are the Hebrews to us? Strangers and sojourners. Let them die.

THE FIRST OLD MAN. Another dead. Another. Still another.

Until that other and no other—am I.

THE THIRD OLD MAN. He came to buy from Ephron the cave of Machpelah,

In which to bury his dead.

THE FIRST OLD MAN. Abraham, that mighty prince, who has gold and silver,

Oxen, sheep, and camels, men servants and maid servants,

Has not the corner of a field that he may call his own.

Scene Four

Outside the city of Nahor. Eliezer and another servant of Abraham enter.

ELIEZER. Let us wait here beside their well . . .

After so many days and nights of hurry,

I am swaying still

Upon my camel.
So when the mind soaks in
The colors of a dream,
Though washed in sunlight, the mind is tinged a while.
. . . Soon the earth's business will be done:
The boys bring home the camels from the fields,
And women leave the looms;
Men and beasts will soon lie down to rest.
Now the sky becomes the busy city . . .
Her brothers must have the strength
We would have in her sons; and she must be of gentle birth,
That when the blossom of her youth is gone,
She has still
The beauty summer has and autumn and the winter.
But well we who must be servants know
How often the sound body and sound mind
In poverty is poisoned;
How strength in poverty is weak and foiled,
And at last spent; and how the gentlest
Become in poverty coarse, or die.
It is well for Isaac and his wife
That he is Abraham's son . . .
If after long acquaintance, our friends
Often prove not friends,
How am I to read a woman at a glance,
A girl's face at that, a blank page mostly,
On which I should read
What is not written yet?

THE OTHER SERVANT. May we not trust that any woman

To a good husband
Will prove as good a wife?

ELIEZER *looking off, touches his companion's arm.* If a kind face is beautiful,
She is that, and if a beautiful face
Is cheering to the eyes and heart,
She is that too . . .
She bends to fill her pitcher.
I will ask for a drink and water for the camels;
If she is kind to a stranger,
Dusty as I with many journeys,
Will she not be gracious to such as Isaac?

Scene Five

REBECCA'S VOICE. And who is he that comes on foot to meet us?

ELIEZER'S VOICE. Isaac.

REBECCA'S VOICE. Then, help me from the camel
That I, too, may go to him on foot.

ELIEZER'S VOICE. May Isaac in you be comforted for his mother,
And you in Isaac and your sons
Be comforted for the home you left.
We, too, to-night shall be glad—
That we are home again. *Rebecca enters, veiled, then Eliezer, Abraham's other servants, and Rebecca's nurse.*

Scene Six

THE ELDEST OF THE HERDSMEN. If Ishmael were the master, they would not dare this.

THE ELDEST OF THE SHEPHERDS. How gentle Isaac was beside Ishmael,

When he was here to bury Abraham:
Isaac has lived in booths and tents,
His clothing woven from the hair of goats and camels;
Ishmael was in the skins of the wild deer he has killed.
Isaac's face is like honey, Ishmael's
Like the black rocks among which he hunts;
Ishmael's hair and beard are two bushes,
His glances arrows and his hands fists;
Isaac's eyes are like a father's on his grown son,
His palms open as if to help or bless—
Here he comes.

THE ELDEST OF THE HERDSMEN. We were keeping your herds to the east,
When those who own the land filled with earth
The wells we dug,
Saying,
Your master Isaac has become too rich among us.

THE ELDEST OF THE SHEPHERDS. And so they did to us who are pasturing your flocks. *Abimelech enters with the chief of his council and the captain of his men.*

ABIMELECH. Isaac, your flocks and herds have grown so great,
Our land cannot feed yours and ours;
Your servants have become so many that you have become mighty in my land;
Go, for this land is not wide enough for you and me.

ISAAC. My wealth is the wealth of the land in which I am,
In a time of hunger yours as well as mine;
My men in a time of need are also yours.

My father, Abraham, took no man's, but if one said of his,
This is mine, he answered, It is yours;
Nevertheless, he grew richer.
And this my father did, not out of fear—
For you remember,
When the five kings were defeated among the slime pits of Siddim,
He saved my cousin Lot, his goods and his people—
Abraham gave because of friendliness.
I am my father's son in this:
That I wish all men well;
Surely the stars send them sorrows enough.
But if you say that here there is no room for us,
My father, Abraham, and his father, Terah, wandered far;
The Earth is wide,
And as they prospered, their son may hope to prosper.

Abimelech and his men go out. A herdsman enters.

THE HERDSMAN *to Isaac.* We dug a well in the valley of Gerar and the herdsmen of the valley said,
The water is ours,
And would not let us draw from the well we ourselves had dug.

ISAAC. Let them have it.

ANOTHER HERDSMAN *enters.* We left our companions and went a day's journey and dug a well,
And the herdsmen of the valley came upon us and said, This too is ours.

ISAAC. Leave this, too.

ANOTHER HERDSMAN *enters.* We dug a well beyond the valley and are not troubled.

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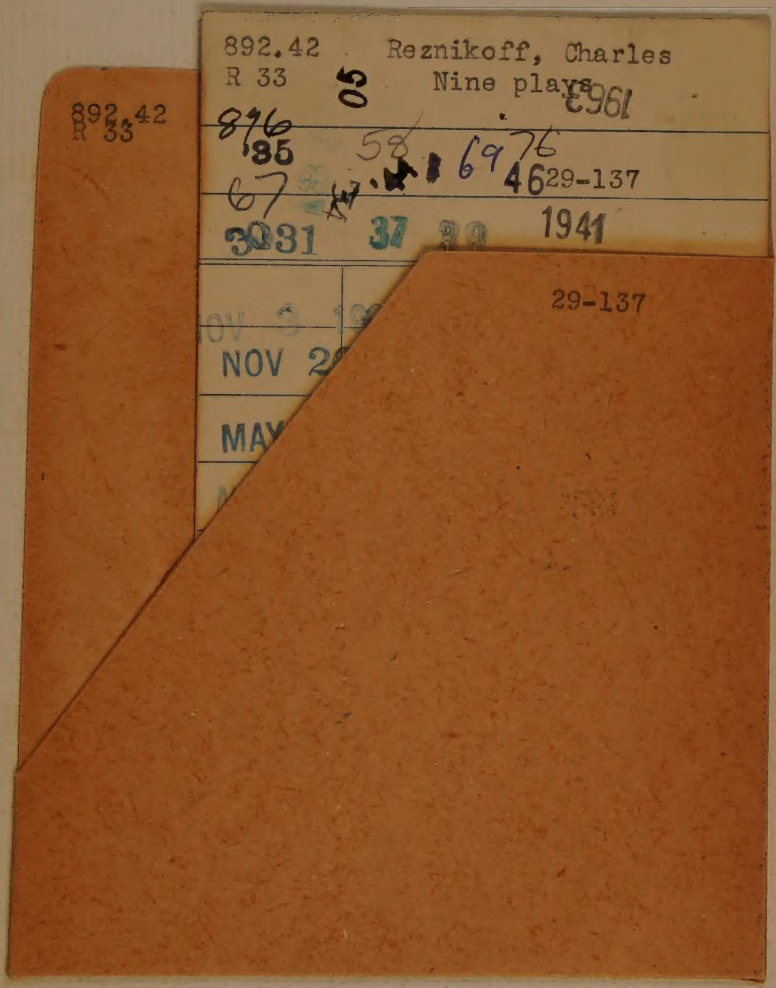
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